Children Beware!

Children's horror, PG-13 and the emergent Millennial pre-teen

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the children's horror trend of the 1980s and 1990s focused on the transformation of the concepts of childhood and horror. Specifically, it discusses the segmentation of childhood to include the pre-teen demographic, which emerges as a distinct Millennial figure, and the ramifications of this social and cultural shift both on the horror genre and the entertainment industry more broadly, namely through the introduction of the deeply impactful PG-13 rating.

The work thus adds to debates on children and horror, examining and questioning both sides: notions of suitability and protection of vulnerable audiences, as well as cultural definitions of the horror genre and the authority behind them. The thesis moreover challenges the reasons behind academic dismissal of these texts, pointing out their centrality to on-going discussions over childhood, particularly the pre-teen demographic, and suggesting a different approach to the PG-13 rating, its origin and its present-day status.

Structured as a comprehensive outline of the children's horror trend with special emphasis on its influential film cycle, the thesis explores the dissonances between definitions of horror in the children's sphere and the adult's sphere, and highlights the parallels between the children's horror trend and Millennial childhood both in period (early 1980s-late 1990s) and progression (initial controversy over the boundaries of childhood, focus on transition and pre-adolescence, and decline), suggesting the children's horror trend as a hub for period-specific struggles over childhood that were strongly associated with the emergence of the pre-teen as a new Millennial demographic. The thesis therefore brings to light an unjustly forgotten trend and contextualizes it to reveal a tremendous shift in American attitudes toward childhood, the horror genre and the film industry itself.

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Introduction

I was ten years old when I read *Welcome to Dead House* by R.L. Stine. It was an exhilarating experience, terrifying all the way through, from the haunting picture on the cover to the twist on the last page. I read many other books in the *Goosebumps* series after that and swapped with my friends for more. We loved the scares. Many of us had already been introduced to horror; I remember intense playground discussions of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Enemy Mine* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1985),*Child's Play* (Tom Holland, 1988) and other films we caught on TV, perhaps without parental permission. But *Goosebumps* was different, as were films like *The Gate* (Tibor Takacs, 1987), and television series like *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (YTV, 1990-1996). *Alien* gave me terrible nightmares; *Goosebumps* some of my fondest childhood memories. My feelings on this are far from unique, as attested by the many other twenty-somethings who express their nostalgia today through online fan outlets.

The seed for this research project was planted in my mind when I first noticed that we, the children of the 1990s, were more or less alone in our appreciation of this sort of horror. When I went to film school to become a screenwriter and wrote several children's horror scripts I found myself having to constantly explain what exactly I was trying to do by putting children and horror together. People older than me, in particular, seemed to have some trouble understanding that I was not trying to write the next *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, 1960) or re-imagining *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976). When I later went down the path of academia, I was again confronted with the apparent foreignness of children's horror as a concept. "Oh, like *The Exorcist*?" people would ask me. And when I looked at the literature I could barely find mention of any of the texts I remembered from my childhood, even the very popular ones such as *Goosebumps*. The few references I did find rarely mentioned these films as a unit, a cycle or a trend of that time period, instead portraying them as separate entities. Frustratingly, the very few cases which suggested them as a trend never quite

seemed to describe them in a way that I felt was accurate given my personal experience and that of my peers.

As an inexperienced researcher, I naively thought I could identify all the ins and outs of children's horror and provide a definitive guide to this trend, covering its life cycle between the 1980s and the late 1990s/early 2000s. But early in my research, I stumbled upon something much more interesting. I noticed that all of the films, television programs and books I called children's horror were in one way or another about the limits of childhood, and progressed chronologically toward an intense thematic preoccupation with the transition out of childhood, at which point they became centered on pre-teen characters. Not coincidentally, the twenty-somethings who remember children's horror today were pre-teens in the 1990s — and so I became aware of an intrinsic connection between this generation and children's horror by way of pre-adolescence. These observations are what eventually gave this thesis its direction. Before I can elaborate further on this argument, however, it is useful to address some of the context for the children's horror trend and the issues it concerns.

Children and the problem of horror

Children and horror have a long history. Horror can be found at large in children's culture, in nursery rhymes, fairy tales and other literature, in games, everywhere — just as children can be found at large in horror, even embodying one of the genre's most recognizable motifs, that of the evil child. Many authors have pored over the history of this relationship and its meaning, among them Marina Warner,[1] Maria Tatar,[2] Bruno Bettelheim,[3] and Anna Jackson et al,[4] as well as Robin Wood,[5] Kim

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[1] Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).
[2] Maria Tatar, *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood* (New York: W. W. Norton 7 Company, 2009).
[3] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991).
[4] Anna Jackson; Roderick McGillis; Karen Coats, *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*, Children's Literature and Culture (London: Routledge, 2007).
[5] Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan-- and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Newman,[6] and James Twitchell.[7] Other scholars, such as John Springhall,[8] Sarah Smith,[9] and Martin

Barker and Julian Petley[10] have outlined and explored the debates specifically around the restrictions

imposed on children and horror. Indeed, preoccupations over the possible negative effects of horror

and violence on the children who consume it are one in a long line of well-documented concerns and

debates over children and the media, often with direct repercussion in laws and regulations: not too

long ago Britain experienced the "video nasties" ban, while the V chip (parental control technology

for television) was introduced in the USA in the 1999, not to mention several adjustments to the film

rating system all through the 1980s. More recently still, a rating system for music videos is being

trialed in the United Kingdom,[11] to prevent minors from being exposed to scenes of overt violence,

as well as sexuality.

Thus children and horror can and are often combined, even though such a combination is frequently

chastised. The paradox is curious but not perplexing. In a study of *Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose

suggested that children's literature is based on adult notions of the idyllic child with the purpose of

shaping child readers to meet this ideal.[12] Rose's observation is poignant also when considering

children's entertainment outside of literature, particularly children's media, which is often heavily

associated with ideas of quality and education, two terms defined exclusively by adult society. (And,

indeed, the ways children define quality, for example by devoting their time to a series or franchise

or preferring its merchandise, are often disregarded by adults as the effects of consumerism and

advertising.) Horror in children's literature has often been read in ways that fit this premise, for

instance as used in cautionary tales. The topic was addressed by Jack Zipes apropos of

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[6] Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988).
[7] James B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*, ed. Oxford University Press (New York; Oxford1985).
[8] John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta Rap, 1830-1996* (London: Palgrave macmillan, 1999).
[9] Sarah J Smith, *Children, Cinema & Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).
[10] Martin Barker and Julian Petley, *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate* (London: Routledge, 1997).
[11] British Board of Film Classification, "Online Music Videos," http://www.bbfc.co.uk/what-classification/online-music-videos.
[12] Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan; or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

Struwwelpeter: "The explicit drastic punishments that the children experience in the stories were to be held before the eyes of children (and adults) as warnings of what awaited them if they were to make the same mistake."[13] Zipes also noted how children's literature in the nineteenth century "became the arena in which battles were fought over the bodies and souls of children. (And it is not much different today, although we now rely more on the visual images in film and on the TV screen to create impressions of young people's bodies and minds.)"[14] A useful comparison can be made here between children and women, another group who has historically been considered vulnerable. In her work on Gothic literature, Kate Ellis wrote:

> *The debate about the nature and purpose of female education that proliferated in print during the second half of the eighteenth century made it clear that women's reading was a matter of public concern, not just of private choice. Thus the mass-produced novel was both a product of the construction of separate spheres for men and women and, insofar as it gave women examples to follow, a medium through which that construction of gender relations could be elaborated. But it could also subvert that construction, and I will argue that the Gothic novel does this, creating, in a segment of culture directed toward women, a resistance to an ideology that imprisons them even as it posits a sphere of safety for them.[15]*

As with the Gothic novel for women, horror for children has an inherent duality. If on the one hand, it asserts the social and cultural construction of separate spheres for adults and children by presenting a selected version of reality that has been deemed appropriate for a young audience, it also has the power to subvert these structures by presenting children with glimpses of the world of adults and consequently blurring the boundaries between them. But where the Gothic novel specifically addressed women, horror does not always address children and may in fact be produced

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[13] Jack Zipes, *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 155.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of the Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), x.

under the assumption that it will not be consumed by them. Many of the films that became

controversial because they were watched by children (e.g., *Child's Play 3* (Jack Bender, 1991)) were

not advertised to children and, furthermore, had been labeled as not suitable through their rating (R,

NC-17, or even X).

Therefore when considering children and horror, it is important to note how horror is and is not

included within children's culture. Here, rating systems become especially significant, as they

establish very clear distinctions between the perceived spaces of childhood and those of adulthood.

The history of censorship and ratings in Hollywood illustrates this much. Before the ratings were

instituted in America, films adhered to a production code, also known as the Hays Code, which

regulated the kind of content that was permissible. Its list of "Don'ts" and "Be carefuls" sought to

ensure that all films were appropriate, suitable and edifying to even the most vulnerable audiences,

often personified as children. In this context, all genres, including horror, were suitable for children

as there were no distinctions between young and mature audiences. In the 1960s, however, the

foundations of the Code were at odds with cultural attitudes — its "stern, forbidding catalogue [had]

the odious smell of censorship"[16] were the words of Jack Valenti, the man at the helm of the Motion

Pictures Association of America who instituted the ratings system as a replacement for the Code.

Instead of determining what could and could not be shown, the ratings aimed to simply label the

content and divide it into levels of suitability, which viewers could then use as guidelines. A

particularly important characteristic of this system is that it provided a clear frontier between

children and adults, the R rating, thus allowing filmmakers to express their creative visions without

being bound to suitability concerns (at least in theory).

Since its inception in 1968, the ratings system has sustained remarkably little change — its main

modification happened in 1984 with the introduction of the PG-13 classification. Seeing as the

system is age-based and entirely founded on the separation of children and adults, this change is

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[16] Kevin S. Sandler, *The Naked Truth Why Hollywood Doesn't Make X-Rated Movies* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 43.

significant: it allowed for a middle-ground to be established between the ratings of children (G and

PG) and that of adults (R and beyond), where previously-restricted content, namely horror, could

now thrive. But, astonishingly, PG-13 is rarely addressed. Debates over the ratings tend to fall into

two categories: "good" instances of control that protect children by shielding them from adult

content, and "bad" instances of control that oppress adults by limiting them to "children's" content.

What little attention PG-13 has received has fallen into the first group, reduced to notions of

protection, as in studies of the "ratings creep" (the idea that ratings have become more permissive

and less suitable for children over time).[17] This omission in literature is particularly striking as there is

mention of PG-13 films in the context of studies regarding childhood, in which authors often

mention the popularity of PG-13 films with children, specifically with the pre-teen demographic

(James Cameron's Titanic (1997) is often cited[18]).[19] Yet, even though this move in children's (and the

industry's) preferences is very clear in the 1990s, PG-13 and its impact on children's entertainment is

seldom mentioned.

Indeed, PG-13 is virtually invisible in ratings history, vastly overshadowed by another change to the

system, the replacement of the X rating by the NC-17 classification in 1990 (and its adjustment in

1996). Where PG-13 only added ambiguity to the lines drawn between children and adults, NC-17

directly affected distribution and availability, immediately raising loud questions about illegitimate

control, censorship and the infantilisation of adult audiences. Though it is generally agreed that

adults have the authority to decide what is suitable for children and what is not, it is not so clear

whether any entity should have the power to do the same for adult audiences. Appropriately, then,

the X and NC-17 classifications have been the object of plenty of good research.[20] But it is

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[17] Ron Leone and Laurie Barowski, "Mpaa Ratings Creep: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Pg-13 Rating Category in Us Movies," *Journal of Children and Media* 5, no. 1 (2011).
[18] Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 36. Anne Sutherland, *Kidfluence: The Marketer's Guide to Understanding and Reaching Generation Y - Kids, Tweens and Teens* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 99.
[19] Julian Wood, "Repeatable Pleasures: Notes on Young People's Use of Video," in *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media*, ed. David Buckingham (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).
[20] Stephen Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Sandler, *The Naked Truth Why Hollywood Doesn't Make X-Rated Movies*;

unfortunate that academics have focused so much on this change to the detriment of the one

introduced by PG-13, particularly when we consider the incomparable significance of PG-13 films to

the economy and viability of the filmmaking industry. PG-13 films attract the widest audience and

make the most profit; PG-13 is such a desirable classification, in fact, that producers will introduce

language into a PG film to climb up the rating ladder (as speculated in relation to the dubbed-in

swear in *The Avengers* (Jeremiah Chechik, 1998)) or edit certain content to avoid the R (as seen in

recent action film franchises like *Live Free or Die Hard* (Len Wiseman, 2007).

It is also interesting to note how the concerns around the ratings, particularly PG-13, differ when

addressed socially (in the press) and academically. Both camps seem to address the problem of

media effects or influence, particularly where screen violence is concerned, but where social

commentators sometimes consider the idea of a changing childhood, scholars contextualise PG-13

strictly in commercial and economic terms[21] or focus on policy and the "ratings creep."[22] This

indicates a problematic disconnection between how PG-13 was perceived at the time of its creation

and how scholars have come to think of it. It is important to analyse the ratings in terms of their

relationship with the cultural boundaries of childhood and adulthood, but this approach should

complement rather than obliterate the nuances of these frontiers. This is particularly relevant when

observing the express link between children's horror and the creation of PG-13: this classification

was introduced as a direct response to the social upheaval caused by *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984) and

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (Steven Spielberg, 1984), two films that blurred the

boundaries established in 1968 by the rating system by bringing horror out of the R rating and into

PG. Thus PG-13 and the history of its creation cannot, and should not, be separated from struggles

over the limits of adulthood, childhood and suitability.

Jon Lewis, *Hollywood V. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
[21] Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*.
[22] Brad J. Bushman and Joanne Cantor, "Media Ratings for Violence and Sex: Implications for Policymakers and Parents," *American Psychologist* 58, no. 2 (2003).

Horror and the problem of children

The policing of boundaries between children and adults is of extreme importance not just to children's advocates or critics of the ratings; it is an exercise inherent to horror, a genre whose boundaries have also been incessantly policed. A particularly important milestone of these debates was precisely the introduction of film ratings in 1968. Before the ratings, horror films were made with child audiences in mind and forced to conform with socially-accepted ideas of suitability; after the ratings, horror could be as violent, as extreme and as challenging as filmmakers willed it — or, in a more realistic context of distribution, as far as the scope of the ratings allowed it. In any case, what the ratings system brought to horror in 1968 with the R and X classifications was a very clear frontier between child and adult audiences. Horror films were now made with the adult viewer in mind and purposefully disconnected from children. Where they had been bound by ideas of suitability they were now free to oppose them, and often did.

The extreme significance of this period has been noted by horror experts and critics. It is, for example, where Kim Newman chose to begin his chronicle of the genre in *Nightmare Movies*. In the preface to his latest update of the work, Newman stressed that his revision was "a continuing story, not a reboot," explaining that "horror changed radically in 1968; nothing similar happened the year my book came out [1988]."[23] What Newman does not mention, and may have dismissed, is that something very similar did happen, even if it happened while Newman was writing (in 1984) rather than when the book was released: the introduction of PG-13, a classification that disrupted the frontiers so clearly established in 1968. Even if Newman never specified it, much of his opinions about the state of the horror genre in the 1980s are direct responses to PG-13's influence, namely the market dominance of non-adult audiences and their courting by horror filmmakers. As other

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[23] Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: Horror on Screen since the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 6.

horror aficionados, Newman found the idea of horror being made for a demographic other than adults deeply alarming and was very outspoken about it. His disapproval leaped out of the page:

> House 2: The Second Story *(1986), is even less coherent* [than *House* (Steve Miner, 1986)] *and tries even harder to be a kiddie comedy rather than a horror movie, despite its impressive 9ft-tall cowboy zombie. These movies – along with such big-budget, major studio films as* Fright Night *and* The Lost Boys*, and cheapies such as* Trick or Treat *and* The Gate *– reduce the genre to the level of* Scooby-Doo, Where Are You? *With children, adolescents or childish young men in the leads, and with one scene of knockabout looning for every dose of effect-dripping monstrousness, the films provide the MTV generation with something to watch every three minutes but are unable to get seriously scary, or even seriously funny. All they prove is nobody needs a safe horror picture.*

Here, Newman made clear that the two problems with horror in the 1980s were its associations with children and comedy (but primarily the former), leaving little doubt that he blamed the "MTV generation" (here referring more to Generation X than the newly-arrived Millennials), their diminutive intellectual power and deficient attention span for this wave of incoherent, silly and disgraceful "safe horror." The author's bias against youth and his desire to champion a specific kind of horror are so strong that he failed to consider any other elements in the films, ending up criticising a children's film for targeting children (*The Gate*) and a horror-comedy for being funny (*House* and its sequel), dismissing them as "safe" rather than stimulating simply because they do not conform to his adult taste — a logic which perhaps most academics would challenge. The incoherency of this judgment is made most obvious when the author writes on *The Monster Squad* (Fred Dekker, 1987), a children's horror-comedy. Suddenly the child characters are "genuinely

ingratiating" and the film not safe but "a wholly charming homage to the great days of Universal and

Hammer."[24] The homage angle is pursued even further:

> *Rather than update the classic themes, Dekker waxes nostalgic about the days when such*
>
> *monster rallies were common and stages several big action climaxes in the way Universal*
>
> *would have done if they'd had the money and effects resources back in the 1940s.*[25]

In other words, Newman exceptionally enjoyed *The Monster Squad* because, in his eyes, it was not

for children. Instead, Newman read it as a film for the audience old enough and intelligent enough to

remember Universal and Hammer as the "great days" of horror (not acknowledging that through

video and television, children and teens could also be familiar with these historic texts – incidentally,

just like the children in *The Monster Squad*). Newman's views on children and horror did not

improve with time. "Perhaps reflecting the dubious state of youth culture," the author later wrote,

"90s teens are an infantilising rather than edgy horror influence: Teenage Exorcist (1990) and the

Elm Street sequels are emblematic, as perhaps is the boom in young adult horror fiction."[26]

Newman was not alone in his dislike for "infantilising" influences. Robin Wood also criticised the

horror genre and fantasy films for being children's films in disguise. According to the author, these

films "construct the adult spectator as a child, or, more precisely, as a childish adult."[27] For Wood,

this is not as much a fault of the films as it is a response to audiences' desire to be infantile as a way

to seek reassurance and evade responsibility.[28] Concerns over an infantilisation of cinema during this

period transcend the genres of horror and fantasy, and have been voiced about popular film and

blockbusters more generally, particularly targeted at Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, filmmakers

who "marched backwards through the looking glass, producing pictures that were […] infantilizing

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[24] *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, 35.
[25] Ibid., 35-36.
[26] *The Bfi Companion to Horror* (London: Cassell, 1996), 310.
[27] Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan-- and Beyond*, 145.
[28] Ibid., 147.

the audience, reconstructing the spectator as a child, then overwhelming him and her with sound and spectacle, obliterating irony, aesthetic self-consciousness, and critical reflection."[29]

Just as the work of Spielberg and Lucas has been rejected by critics partial to the ethos of New Hollywood, those wishing to elevate horror likewise rejected the genre's "childish" offerings. This was not the only path to champion the genre, however; some critics preferred to read deeper meanings in these films, rather than discard them. Carol Clover, for instance, argued for an association of the slasher film with cultural concerns on gender that distanced it from notions of childhood, childishness and superficial entertainment.[30] Although Clover followed a different approach to Newman, her views also strongly suggest that horror is not about children or childish things — on the contrary, it is firmly rooted in the adult world and delves deeply in adult concerns and adult anxieties.

What brings all of these perspectives together is their agreement over the incompatibility of children and horror, or even children and film more broadly. The problem with these approaches, however, is that they summarily reject the possibility of children's films (and even those "childish" films) as having any kind of cultural or social meaning beyond providing evidence of the degradation of cinema and of the American psyche. The questions about attitudes, values and social change raised by these films — and by this kind of selective reception — are unfortunately swept under the carpet, overpowered by questions of genre purity, spectatorship and affirmations of cultural power.

Overlooking children's horror

The links between children's horror and issues of childhood, genre, ratings and boundaries are clear and provide some answers for why children's horror might have been ignored. However, the

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[29] Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How Teh Sex 'N' Drugs 'N' Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 343-44.
[30] Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

literature also points to another important factor: quite simply, these texts have failed to seduce an

adult audience. The lack of adult interest in consuming and enjoying this content has insulated

children's horror within the realm of children's culture, therefore making it difficult for it to catch

the adult eye (which is, by default, also the academic eye). This situation is evident when one

considers the kind of things that scholars have chosen to focus on when discussing children's culture

of recent years.

 Harry Potter, for instance, has been the focus of numerous scholarly essays and books, from a

variety of angles.[31] J. K. Rowling's franchise is undoubtedly a cultural icon of the 1990s and beyond,

with tremendous social and industrial impact, and still holding several Guinness Records to prove it,

including Best Selling Book Series for Children.[32] But consider the previous record-holder of the same

title: R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series,[33] one of the most significant titles in the children's horror

trend. *Goosebumps* had very little adult appeal in the 1990s, and remains to this day a series that is

exclusively consumed by children. Although this may give rise to ideas about *Harry Potter*'s superior

literary quality or complexity of layers of understanding, it could also be argued that *Goosebumps*'

sales are far more impressive and impactful than *Harry Potter*'s, given that they were not in any way

influenced by adult interest but were largely the result of children's cultural wants and needs. This

places the *Goosebumps* franchise very high in the list of important children's cultural items of the

1990s, yet it has not received even a fraction of the academic interest *Harry Potter* has enjoyed.

Indeed, it is precisely because *Harry Potter* transcended children's culture and became a part of

adult culture that it became such a phenomenon and the focus of so many scholars, who sought to

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[31] To mention only a few: Zipes, *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*; Giselle Anatol, *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays* (London: Praeger, 2003); Suman Gupta, *Re-Reading Harry Potter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Lana Whited, *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002); John Houghton, *A Closer Look at Harry Potter* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 2001); David Baggett; Shawn Klein, *Harry Potter and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004); Susan Gunelius, *Harry Potter: The Story of a Global Business Phenomenon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[32] Mike Janela, "Harry Potter Expands, American Idol Contracts, and Pinterest May Cause Stress," Guinness World Records.

[33] Scholastic, "The #1 Best-Selling Children's Book Series of All Time Is Back by Popular Demand!," http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-1-best-selling-childrens-book-series-of-all-time-is-back-by-popular-demand-70864222.html.

deconstruct the business and marketing techniques behind the franchise and deconstruct the messages which appealed to adult readers.

This is a tendency that applies more generally to debates around children's entertainment. Not only is it grossly overlooked in favour of adult-oriented material, it also leans toward the exceptions: texts of which adults strongly approve, texts of which adults strongly disapprove, and texts which in some major way defy expectations. These discussions are also too often frustratingly confined to questions of suitability, "quality" and education. As an illustration of this attitude, consider the prevalent notion that children's animation series of the 1980s were primarily long toy commercials. These claims are reductive of children's entertainment for two reasons. First, they suggest that toys and other commercial items have no value or purpose beyond filling their makers' pockets, disregarding the crucial role toys and play have in children's lives and development. Second, while there is compelling evidence that toys and other tie-ins were a preoccupation of this period, observations on what impact they had on a program's "quality" need to be balanced by the program's actual reception by children. How much did the "toyetic" side of a series matter to them, and is that the only thing worthy of analysis in these programs?

An example: in his analysis of the rebirth of *The Transformers* franchise, Lincoln Geraghty referred to *Transformers*' reputation as a show of low quality ("poor animation, poor dubbing, obvious commercialisation"[34] as well as "the poor stories"[35]), and mentioned how it is "widely regarded as one of the poorer cartoon imports in the Saturday morning TV schedule."[36] The author attributed the series' success with children mainly to marketing strategies; however, he also presented the different point of view of the adults who watched the show as children in the 1980s. For them, *Transformers* was clearly considered to be quality entertainment: its status as "a classic of

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[34] Lincoln Geraghty, "Repackaging Generation One: Genre, Fandom, and the Transformers as Adult/ Children's Television," in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty; Mark Jancovich (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008), 182.
[35] Ibid., 184.
[36] Ibid., 183.

animation" is justified by "one of the finest collections of voice talents ever assembled," "complex characters," "great action scenes" and "a bad guy who turns into a gun;" these things combined make it "one of the coolest cartoons of all time."[37] For Geraghty these statements appear as evidence not of *The Transformers*' content but of the different values applied by fans of the show to define its "quality." If *Transformers* is both of poor quality and of excellent quality, the continued acceptance of only one definition and only one perspective speaks volumes about how children and their culture is regarded, leaving no question of where cultural authority lies.

Nevertheless, it is baffling that we should be content to think that the popularity of some programmes was only due to commercial hype but have not accepted similar justifications for other big money-spinning cultural phenomena like *Twilight*, or even *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, or other youth-oriented texts which have crossed over into adult culture. While it can be argued that there is no other way for adults to discuss children's media other than through adult eyes, and that this perspective is valid given that children's media is produced by adults, it is also true that children and their tastes are unfairly ignored. The result is that the subjects more often perceived to be worthy of analysis are those which directly relate to adults, their likes and dislikes, their readings and their concerns, ostracising anything that falls out of this sphere.

Another useful example is the Japanese anime series *Pokémon*. Joseph Tobin's collection of essay on the series "tells the story of Pikachu's global adventure and discusses what the Pokémon phenomenon can teach us about children's engagement with the new media, Japan's rise as a culture- and software-exporting nation, and the globalization of children's popular culture."[38] Pokémon was thus discussed in terms of what was new about it — its connection with new media, a "new" culture, a new phase for children's culture —, as made clear in one of the essays:

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[37] Ibid., 193.

[38] Joseph Tobin, *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

Like the other contributors to this book, we also want to consider what might be "remarkable" or "unusual" about Pokémon, as distinct from what is merely banal and familiar. In some respects, Pokémon has much in common with earlier textually based "phenomena" in children's media culture […]; although in other respects, it can be seen as merely another instance in a historical sequence of children's "crazes' or 'fads" […] Yet there are also aspects of Pokémon that are decidedly new, and that might provide important indications about future directions in media culture — not just for children, but also for adults.[39]

Unlike Pokémon, children's horror was not novelty; on the contrary, it has been a part of children's culture in one form or another for many centuries. And even at the height of its "craze," children's horror was not necessarily "remarkable:" it did not break out of children's culture, did not engage adult audiences, and did not introduce new concepts or cultural influences as it was a thoroughly domestic (or, at least, western) phenomenon. Children's horror was so mundane in fact it did not even offend. With the exception of the films of the early 1980s, when children's horror was not quite a trend yet, there was very little controversy around it and, as a result, very few reasons for the outside observer to be interested, particularly when there were so many other questions around children's horror (as outlined above), with much higher stakes than children's horror itself.

Dismissing children's horror

In this light, the absence of academic literature on children's horror is unsurprising after all. This is especially so if we consider how any analysis of children's horror would have to contend with the problem of definition and boundaries set by two much more culturally-established, notions, those of

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[39] David Buckingham; Julian Sefton-Green, "Structure, Agency, and Pedagogy in Children's Media Culture," in *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 12.

childhood and horror. To demonstrate the impact of these preconceptions, it is useful to consider

the one exception to children's horror invisibility: literature.

The BFI Companion to Horror's entry on the subject, under the title of "young adult horror,"

describes it as "one of the most extraordinary growth areas in publishing from the mid-1980s

onwards."[40] There is brief reference to a few film examples: *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven,

1984), given as a main example for young adult horror cinema, and *Phantasm* (Don Coscarelli, 1979),

Silver Bullet (Daniel Attias, 1985), and *The Monster Squad*, which are mentioned as examples of

young adult horror predating the trend of the 1990s. These examples reveal the extent to which this

entry is unclear and the term "young adult horror" insufficient. It does not differentiate between

teen-oriented and child-oriented horror, and does not contextualise this trend in the history of

horror — the three films mentioned as trend predecessors are not, as is implied, isolated examples

of youth-oriented horror but an important part of the first wave of this kind of fiction. Nor was the

Goosebumps television series a spin-off of *Are You Afraid of the Dark*, as mentioned in the entry,

even if it was broadcast a few years later. These interpretations suggest that the writer's focus was

on trend peaks (the 1990s, in this case), when children's horror (and its challenge to definitions of

horror) became too big to ignore, rather than on the more subtle trend cycles or progressions that

reveal deeper historical, cultural and industrial issues.

Timothy Morris, who has analysed *Goosebumps* and series fiction of the 1990s, also seems to have

read children's horror strictly in terms of trend peaks, consumerism and economic prowess. The

author pondered if "all that will come out of reading Goosebumps novels is a mindless, soul-

deadening consumerism,"[41] and concluded that "the dynamic of reading and collecting may

ultimately be if more cultural importance than anything in the 'content' of these series. The way we

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[40] Newman, *The Bfi Companion to Horror*, 349.
[41] Timothy Morris, *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 84.

buy and save these books may effectively be their content."[42] These are problematic conclusions as children's desires are far from mere products of greed, hedonism and consumerism, but express a desire for community and for shared culture.[43] Morris' comments are all the more puzzling as the author briefly acknowledged that *Goosebumps* books provide a "fantasy [of pre-adolescence] for eight and nine year olds"[44] without ever attributing cultural importance to this idea. As this thesis will demonstrate, this fantasy is of tremendous significance. Its meaning has been briefly discussed by Geraldine Brennan:

> *[T]hese novels reflect the condition of the young adolescent whose life experience is often that of an incapacitated player in a game with no rulebook. [Their] preoccupations include changes in the body, desire for acceptance by peers, growing awareness of death and loss as presences in their lives even if not as direct threats, and contemplation of their own human nature and their place in society. At this stage in their lives many adolescents feel that there is more uncertainty in their lives than is comfortable, so they turn to horror fiction.[45]*

This quote is perhaps the most interesting out of all studies on children's horror fiction, as it takes the audience's specific situation into account in its reading of the texts. Brennan's study is found in an edited collection focused on children's horror fiction but, disappointingly, the rest of the book suffers from a focus on consumerism and a fixation on generic definitions, as in Newman and Morris. In the introduction, Kimberley Reynolds observed, like Newman, that horror has "spectacularly dominated children's publishing,"[46] yet never mentioned the many other horror-themed texts that existed in abundance in children's culture of the 1980s and 1990s. As before, this omission is critical

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[42] Ibid., 85.

[43] Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 298.

[44] Morris, *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film*, 77.

[45] Geraldine Brennan, "The Game Called Death: Frightening Fictions by David Almond, Philip Gross and Lesley Howarth," in *Frightening Fiction*, ed. Kimberley Reynolds; Geraldine Brennan; Kevin McCarron (London: Continuum, 2001), 126.

[46] Kimberley Reynolds, "Introduction," ibid., 1.

because it removes a sense of continuity and context from the study and suggests an unawareness of the wider trends in children's culture of the period.

This is further aggravated by the deliberate exclusion of *Goosebumps* from analysis due to its young target audience. As Reynolds explained, horror aimed at children is "primarily concerned with showing many childish fears to be unfounded," and "the younger the audience the stronger the drive to take the horror out of horror fiction," thus making these books, in Reynolds' eyes, inappropriate texts to study the phenomenon of frightening fiction. Instead, series like *Point Horror* are deemed "the most influential" and thus favoured in the study. While the distinction certainly exists between the audiences of the two series, the choice to exclude *Goosebumps* from what is purported to be an in-depth study of "what is effectively a new genre of 'frightening fiction'"[47] is perplexing. Not only is the *Goosebumps* series the absolute pioneer in horror fiction for the children's demographic, it is also commercially more successful than *Point Horror*. Moreover, if R.L. Stine has "single-handedly changed everything,"[48] as one of the authors in the book admits, surely it becomes important to study his most influential work (the *Goosebumps* and *Fear Street* series) before analysing his contributions to the multi-authored *Point Horror*.[49]

Puzzling as they might be to me, these decisions and omissions in the *Frightening Fiction* book can be explained by the authors' research context, the United Kingdom. *Goosebumps* was not published here until late 1993, almost a year after it had been published in the United States and two years after *Point Horror* was out in Britain. Furthermore, the series' famous covers were entirely changed

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[47] Ibid., 4.
[48] Kevin McCarron, "Point Horror and the Point of Horror," ibid., 28.
[49] Although his links to the children's horror trend are tenuous, Stephen King deserves brief mention here as another important author who has seen his work debated in terms of readership and definitions of horror. King's stories are frequently about children and childhood, often in central (and critically celebrated) ways, as in *The Body* (1982), adapted to the cinema in *Stand By Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986), or *Carrie* (1974), first adapted in 1976 by Brian de Palma. Moreover, his work is enjoyed by both children and adults, and has long had firm roots in both the children's sphere and the cultural world of adults. Unlike J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* or Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Game*s series, however, Stephen King has not "crossed over;" rather, his work has always existed simultaneously in children's and adult's culture. This dynamic is extremely challenging to reconcile — King might be for children or for adults, depending on who makes the judgement, but not for both at the same time.

for the British market, resulting in a much softer look. For example, *Monster Blood* originally

featured green blood oozing down the stairs with the suggestion of a murder; it was changed in

Britain to a pot of green goo emblazoned with a smiley face. Or *Welcome to Camp Nightmare*,

whose US cover showed a monster about to attack the children inside a tent, and was changed to a

couple of cheerful teenage faces. Occasionally, the illustrations remained similar in theme but had

their intensity drastically toned down, as in *Night of the Living Dummy*, which featured on its US

cover an eerie-looking ventriloquist dummy on all-black background and was changed to a small-

scale happy-looking dummy for the UK market. Or *The Haunted Mask*, where the mask's features

were made comical for British children, or even *The Mummy's Tomb*, where the mummy's creepy

stare was changed to a non-threatening grin. The graphic design on all covers was also changed from

the original blood-dripping effect, usually in strong green, purple and pink, to more abstract-looking

swirls and bubbles in pastel colours for British readers. These changes gave the books a much more

harmless appearance, making it very easy for an adult who did not already engage with these books

as horror to dismiss them as something else or to downplay their position in the children's horror

trend.

Similarly, the other important children's horror texts which Reynolds et al. ignore (in the media of

television and film) had a very different reception in the UK. Perhaps as a result of conservative

attitudes after the "video nasties" controversy, many of the films which predate children's horror

books were the target of restrictions, cuts and censorship: *Gremlins* went up to a 15 rating from an

American PG while *The Witches* had to be edited before receiving a PG in Britain. These variances

are crucial and must be taken into consideration in any study of the genre, as they are evidence of

how differently children's horror was articulated in the British and North American contexts. To use

a strict UK focus, as Reynolds et al. do, could be useful for a study on British reception of these texts

but will invariably lead to inadequate and misleading conclusions if applied to youth-oriented horror

more broadly, particularly as this was mainly an American trend.

The second major weakness of this study is the authors' strict definition of horror. Indeed, these youth-oriented books are condescendingly defined as "what [young people] refer to as 'horror'."[50] For Reynolds, horror is based on "the drive to leave readers feeling uneasy and fearful in the face of uncertainty," whereas "the fiction now sold as horror and written with a juvenile audience in mind is notable for the sense of security it ultimately engenders" — comments which echo Newman's accusations of "safe horror." Another author in the book, McCarron, attributed Stine's popularity with youth to the fact that he specialises not in horror but in terror, a claim based on Twitchell's distinction between the two: horror is irrational and supernatural, terror is rational and, as it applies to Stine according to McCarron, reassuring.[51]

These definitions and distinctions between the various nuances of the horror genre can be interesting but produce very little in the way of understanding the hows and whys of frightening fiction. Furthermore, this strict point of view results in conclusions that are in direct contradiction with the texts, their marketing and their reception by young people. As Reynolds correctly noted, this genre's popularity suggests that it "satisfies a narrative need in many young people," yet the authors appear determined to identify it through their own (adult) perspectives and opinions, in the process actively ignoring the young people they seek to understand. We must interrogate the value of attempting to pinpoint the exact genre of these texts when young people have already declared it to be horror. Obsessed with genre boundaries, these analyses reduce children's horror to something that must be denied in order to preserve a given definition of horror, effectively neglecting the bigger questions raised by this trend.

Childhood and other life stages; the Millennial pre-teen

Connecting all the literature I have been examining is a persistent concern with children and childhood. As Philippe Ariès wrote, "our world is obsessed by the physical, moral and sexual

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[50] Reynolds, "Introduction," 1.
[51] Kevin McCarron, "Point Horror and the Point of Horror," ibid., 29.

problems of childhood."[52] But, as he argued, childhood and children were not always a concern of society; indeed, childhood as a concept did not even exist until relatively recently:

> *This preoccupation* [with children] *was unknown to medieval civilization, because there was no problem for the Middle Ages: as soon as he had been weaned, or soon after, the child became the natural companion of the adult. […] Medieval civilization failed to perceive this difference* [between children and adults] *and therefore lacked this concept of transition. The great event* [leading to the "discovery" of childhood as a concept] *was therefore the revival, at the beginning of modern times, of an interest in education.*[53]

"Childhood," therefore, is a cultural construction and "children" a somewhat fluid demographic, defined by physical and physiological characteristics as well as social, cultural and historical perceptions. [54] The importance of these concepts and their opposition to maturity and adults is hard to overstate in contemporary culture. The cultural notion of the teenager, introduced in the 1940s,[55] adds weight to this suggestion of strict yet flexible boundaries. Positioned in between childhood and adulthood, the teenage years are seen as a period of education and transition, during which the individual still shows child-like attributes (often perceived to be immature, irresponsible and fun-oriented) but is also beginning to affirm himself as an adult (often perceived to have an awareness of the future and the consequences of his actions).

Like the child, the teenager has been emphatically studied, often with a focus on morality and education, as well as economic power. This is unsurprising, seeing as teenagers usually have plenty of free time and disposable income, and thus are powerful consumers, with great visibility and influence on popular culture. But because teenagers are still "children," (that is, not adults) they are seen to require guidance and protection in the marketplace. According to Grace Palladino, this preoccupation is settled through the ways in which the markets have became organized to provide

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[52] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1965), 411.
[53] Ibid., 411-12.
[54] Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
[55] Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (New York: Viking, 2007), xiii.

teenagers with their own spaces, shops and brands, in accordance with the belief that teenagers are a distinct demographic who, like children, have separate interests and specific needs.[56]

Other approaches to the teenager have been more ambiguous. Writing in 1999, Thomas Hine suggested that teenagers are a little more like adults than society gives them credit for, and therefore should be treated as such (like "people," the author wrote[57]) and not like incompetents with no role to play in the advancement of society — like children, it is implied. Hine's work proposed a reshaping of perceptions of the teenage demographic in order to treat them as beginning adults, but it also revealed a conflict of expectations, particularly the expectations of different generations. Although Hine did not expand too much on the topic, he often referred to generations in the development of his arguments: the author positioned himself as a Baby Boomer, with certain expectations of young people, and referred to the parents of teenagers as Generation X, whose attitudes and expectations presumably created the state of affairs Hine was challenging. What this suggests is that even the most apparently well-established social demographics can and will be challenged, re-structured and re-imagined depending on context. The expectations of what it means to be a child, a teenager and an adult are not set in stone but suffer a constant process of transformation, reflecting alterations in the social and cultural climate.

The recent focus on "tweens" is further evidence of this fluidity. Although we can find references to pre-teens in popular culture texts as early as the 1970s,[58] this stage is a concept both recent and still somewhat under construction. In a report commissioned by the USA's Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "tweens" were defined as a group of individuals between the ages of nine and thirteen who are "in transition."[59] This demographic was perceived to be extremely media-savvy and susceptible to marketing messages within certain

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[56] Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), xiii.

[57] Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Perennial, 2000), 28.

[58] For example in Stephen King, *Cujo* (London: Warner Books, 1992), 77.

[59] Aeffect Inc., "Exploring How to Motivate Behavior Change among Tweens in America," (Atlanta: Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000), 5.

"targeted environments" like shopping centers, cinemas and music venues, as well as targeted

television channels and networks, such as MTV, ESPN, Nickelodeon and Comedy Central.[60] The

document acknowledged no consensus on the actual age range of this demographic; tweens are

"loosely defined," and their ages can vary between eight and twelve or nine to fourteen.[61]

This report further layered this "transition" demographic by dividing it into younger tweens (nine to

eleven) and older tweens (twelve to thirteen), describing a change from one category to the other as

a shift from "self-confident, experienced kids" to "self-conscious, inexperienced teens."[62] In general,

tweens aspire to be teenagers and consume media and entertainment which targets that desired

demographic — indeed, teenager is how they see themselves (unlike actual teenagers, who might

feel the label is juvenile).[63] This desire for independence and to be recognised as an individual is at

the basis of the report's recommendation that it is "beneficial to communicate with tweens at a

slightly higher level than their current age, usually about two to three years."[64]

Although this report also defined tweens in terms of their psychology and interests, it demonstrates

how tweens tend to primarily be thought of as consumers, as a group who we seek to understand so

we can better captivate. The very word tween is evidence of this consuming bias, as it is in itself "a

catch term invented by marketers"[65] and often used to refer to an exclusively female demographic.

Nevertheless, consumer groups do not appear out of thin air and cannot logically be created by

marketing strategies alone. Moreover, according to the above-mentioned report, this is a group that

shares a common psychology closely related to age and development but also to social perceptions,

linking tweens as a group to their cultural context. This is an important point and the reason why the

reader will not find the term tween elsewhere in this thesis. I have preferred the word pre-teen,

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 6.
[62] Ibid., 7.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 15.
[65] Ibid., 6.

which enjoys fewer marketing connotations and so is a better reflection of the subject of my attention: not a gendered consumer demographic but an emerging social group.

This point should be elaborated further, as in this thesis I am deliberately moving away from the idea of the pre-teen as a consumer demographic exclusively, which is how it has been understood by authors writing on the child of the 1980s and 1990s. Sarah Banet-Weiser's work on Nickelodeon and the notion of consumer citizenship is particularly relevant here. She observed how "we confuse political citizenship and economic enfranchisement," and described "the logic of this slippage"[66] through Nickelodeon's brand strategies:

> *the market is understood as constitutive of citizenship through the interpellation of children, and this interpelation of children is about making subjects for that market. Nickelodeon has been significant in producing not only this dynamic but also a generation that understands consumption as acts of citizenship.*[67]

By identifying popular media's recognition of "a particular political economic agency of children" and "the unprecedented ways in which children are constituted as a commercial market,"[68] Banet-Weiser is very persuasive in her suggestion of a consumer culture that moved away from ideas of enchantment and toward the empowerment of children (specifically pre-teens) in the late 1980s and particularly the 1990s. Other authors have explored similar points about consumer culture, popular culture and the empowerment of the child in this period, especially in relation to transmedia markets and their intertextuality.[69]

My perspective in this thesis differs in the sense that the socio-cultural (and, indeed, industrial and economical) changes circulated in the children's horror trend and the PG-13 classification anticipate

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[66] Sarah Banet-Weiser, Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.
[67] Ibid., 7.
[68] Ibid., 8.
[69] Dan Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester Unviersity Press, 1996); Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

the market shifts explored by Banet-Weiser and other authors. There was certainly an aspect of transmedia flow within the children's horror trend and many of its texts acknowledge the changes in market landscapes in the 1980s and 1990s (namely the understanding of children's access to ancillary markets and technologies like video as means of accessing horror more generally); but they were generally preoccupied not with the commercial exploitation — or even the commercial empowerment — of this demographic but rather with its definition (and were, moreover, critically perceived this way, as the thesis will illustrate). The reader will notice, for instance, that the only children's media title which fits the frameworks proposed by Banet-Weiser or Marsha Kinder is *Goosebumps*, a franchise of the 1990s, which appeared only after the PG-13 classification had been established and, therefore, after the pre-teen demographic had been accepted as a distinct social group.

As a "new" demographic, pre-teens are, like children and teenagers before them, intrinsically linked to the cultural forces of its historical period. And on this point, it becomes useful to pick up Hines' brief thoughts on generations and connect the pre-teen to the Millennial generation. The term Millennials was coined by Neil Howe and William Strauss to refer to the generation of people born between 1982 and the year 2000. This generation is known by a few other names, most commonly Echo Boom or Generation Y, or names which allude to today's technology-heavy climate such as Generation DotCom. In the same way I have rejected the term tween, I also reject these denominations, and for similar reasons as those quoted by Howe and Strauss when coining Millennials: these other terms assume this generation is simply a continuation of previous generations or describe it only in terms of consumerism and technology.[70]

Howe and Strauss argue that the 1980s were a period of change in western (specifically American) society, culture and attitudes, changes which have influenced how the cohort born in that and the following decade was raised and how those individuals were socially perceived. The key change, the

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[70] Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 7.

authors argue, was a "rediscovery" of children as valuable, a change which led to the "echo boom"

and the large number of Millennial births. Consequently, all things to do with children were

restructured and reconsidered, much as they had been when childhood was first "discovered,"

according to Ariès' account. Parenting trends, for example, changed to favour a more hands-on

approach, re-enforcing a (neo)traditional idea of family. Children's entertainment proliferated and

became of (perceived) higher quality in the late 1980s and especially the 1990s. As children assumed

a more central position in the American family, parents increasingly desired to keep them well-

provided for and happy, thus allowing children to become a demographic very sought-after by

companies and marketers. Likewise in popular culture: dedicated networks like Nickelodeon became

incredibly profitable, as well as music groups primarily targeting children, such as the Spice Girls. In

academia, too, children's culture emerged as a topic to be taken seriously.[71]

As part of this renewed interest in children, social concerns over safety and protection became

intensified. With the advent of Millennials, there was a focus on regulation, legislation and

campaigns around the protection of children from media violence, physical and emotional abuse,

drugs and the general phenomenon known as the "adultification of youth,"[72] which supposedly

deprives children of a childhood, forcing them to grow up too fast, too sexualised, too

commercialised.[73] These concerns stem from the belief in the innocence of children and childhood

as a period of bliss; for those who subscribed to these myths, the longer children could be kept in a

state of uncorrupted innocence the better. This attitude is, according to Howe & Strauss, a

characteristic of the way Millennials were parented, drastically different from the parenting

attitudes applied to other generations, namely Generation X.

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[71] See, for instance, Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader*; David Buckingham, *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996); Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham, *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences* (London: British Film Institute, 1995); Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture*.
[72] Sutherland, *Kidfluence: The Marketer's Guide to Understanding and Reaching Generation Y - Kids, Tweens and Teens*, 2.
[73] As defended, for example, in Michael Medved, *Hollywood Versus America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

One last thing should be noted about the Millennial generation. Now that its period of childhood is long gone, there has been an interesting shift in popular debate: even as concerns over childhood continue to be central, a new spotlight of public attention has fallen on the young adult demographic. Millennial young adults are in fact a topic as hotly debated today as Millennial pre-teens were in the 1990s. But while the children were (and are) seen to be too grown-up, Millennial twenty-somethings are perceived to be too immature, delaying commitments such as marriage, children, mortgages and steady careers, often "boomeranging" back to their parents' home. Young adults and their "quarter-life crisis"[74] have made their way into many popular culture texts, from films such as *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003) and *Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011), to chart hits like Alphaville's *Forever Young* and HBO's successful television series *Girls* (2012-).

The extent to which this "infantilisation" of Millennial young adults is a problem can be seen also in the press, particularly in Robin Marantz Henig's highly influential article for The New York Times Magazine. Published in August 2010, it was entitled "What Is It About 20-Somethings?" and asked the question that "pops up everywhere:" "why are so many people in their 20s taking so long to grow up?"[75] Other publications and headlines expanded on this debate: while some ponder if Millennials should be taken "seriously"[76] or if they will save us as Howe & Strauss suggest, many seem to focus mainly on the ways in which they are struggling and failing: in the office (their career mistakes,[77] their high rates of "burn-out,"[78] the things they "don't get"[79]), their family life (or, more

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[74] A. Robbins and A. Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis: How to Get Your Head Round Life in Your Twenties* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001); Amelia Hill, "The Quarterlife Crisis: Young, Insecure and Depressed," *The Guardian*, 5 May 2011.

[75] Robin Marantz Henig, "What Is It About 20-Somethings?," The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22Adulthood-t.html?pagewanted=all.

[76] Jenna Goudreau, "Why We Need to Take 20-Somethings Seriously," Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2012/04/24/why-we-need-to-take-20-somethings-seriously/.

[77] Susan Adams, "The Biggest Mistakes 20-Something Job Seekers Make," Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/07/31/the-biggest-mistakes-20-something-job-seekers-make-2/; Jenna Goudreau, "Youth in the Office: A Gen-Y Guidebook to Career Success," Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2012/04/23/youth-in-the-office-a-gen-y-guidebook-to-career-success.

[78] Larissa Faw, "Why Millennial Women Are Burning out at Work by 30," Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/sites/larissafaw/2011/11/11/why-millennial-women-are-burning-out-at-work-by-30.

precisely, their lack of a family[80]), and their reduced or inexistent independence (their debt,[81]

inability to move out of their parents' house,[82] labels such as "boomerang generation"). In summary,

Millennials or, as they are sometimes called, the "ME ME ME Generation,"[83] are perceived to be a

group of Peter Pans who "lack realism"[84] and cannot meet social expectations of adulthood.

This issue of "adultified" children and "infantilised" adults presents us with the conundrum of a

generation that stirs up tension every time it undergoes a major life transition. Robin Henig's piece

suggested Millennial young adults are living a period of adaptation and redefining what it means to

be an adult in today's western world, an idea also strongly advocated by scholar Jeffrey Jensen

Arnett. The author refers to this period of life as "emerging adulthood," and believes it to be an

entirely separate life stage in between adolescence and adulthood. Although Arnett does not

consider emerging adulthood to be a generational phenomenon and never mentioned Millennials in

his work, his description of the psyche of emerging adults is remarkably similar to the Millennial

optimism described by Howe & Strauss.[85] Furthermore, the connection is suggested in Arnett's

research, particularly the way he attributed the formation of emerging adulthood to a very specific

cultural context — the advent of birth control, the delaying of marriage and parenthood, better

access to higher education and "unprecedented freedom"[86] —, a context very similar to the one

used by Howe & Strauss to explain Millennial characteristics.

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[79] Jason Nazar, "20 Things 20-Year-Olds Don't Get," Forbes,
http://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonnazar/2013/07/23/20-things-20-year-olds-dont-get.
[80] Olga Khazan, "The Childless Millennial," The Atlantic,
http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/04/millenials-not-having-babies/391721/.
[81] Martha C. White, "Today's Young Adults Will Never Pay Off Their Credit Card Debts," TIME,
http://business.time.com/2013/01/17/todays-young-adults-will-never-pay-off-their-credit-card-debts/.
[82] Brad Tuttle, "Being 30 and Living with Your Parents Isn't Lame -- It's Awesome," TIME,
http://business.time.com/2012/03/20/being-30-and-living-with-your-parents-isnt-lame-its-awesome/.
[83] Joel Stein, "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," TIME, http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/.
[84] John Bingham, "Recession Has Turned 'Blair's Children' into a 'Peter Pan Generation'," The Telegraph,
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/10038806/Recession-has-turned-Blairs-children-into-a-Peter-Pan-generation.html.
[85] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[86] Ibid., 7.

Therefore we may begin to see a Millennial trend of challenges to the life cycle. When this generation was a child, it prompted questions around childhood and its boundaries; when it grew into young adulthood, it then prompted questions around adulthood and its boundaries. These challenges are in many ways the same. For example, the way Arnett describes emerging adulthood is very similar to how one might describe the pre-teen stage. Emerging adulthood is characterised by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, hope for the future, and feelings of being "in-between, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult."[87] The pre-teen years, similarly, are a time when children explore their individuality, suffer the emotional and physical instability brought on by the onset of puberty, and therefore are often self-focused, while also looking forward to the freedom and pleasures of the teenage years, all the while feeling in-between, in transition, neither child nor adolescent.

The suggestion in these considerations is that the Millennial generation (that is, its historical, social and cultural context) is directly related to a re-structuring of the entire life cycle as it is perceived in western society. This change consists of a move from the idea of a two-phase cycle (childhood and adulthood, with adolescence as a period of transition in between the two) to notions of a three-phase cycle (childhood, adolescence and adulthood, with two important transition stages: pre-adolescence and emerging adulthood). If this shift is happening and Millennials are implicated, it makes sense that the two main historical points of tension and struggle are focused around the time of each new development: Millennial childhood (1980s and 1990s), when the pre-teen emerges as a demographic and permanently alters social perceptions of childhood, and Millennial maturity (2000s-2010s), when the emergent adult becomes a point of social preoccupation, challenging cultural views on adulthood. The concept of a generation may be abstract but it provides a useful way to contextualize and understand the children's horror trend by highlighting its link to real children and to a historical moment of deep cultural change.

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[87] Ibid., 8.

A map for the road ahead: intervention and other important notes on this work

With the background laid out, it should be clear why a new approach to children's horror is necessary and where I am poised to make my contribution. These texts have remained invisible in spite of their many points of impact (social, cultural and industrial) and of the many poignant questions they raise about western attitudes. Indeed, the amount of debate these films and books have generated — even though these debates were almost never directly about them — is enough evidence of their problematic nature. Now that these other debates have quieted, it is time to go back and fill the large gap left behind.

The time is right for this analysis as all the elements are finally in full view. It would have been difficult to fully explore this trend's cultural significance without a clear idea of where it begins and ends, where social debates peak and where (or if) there were any repercussions. In this specific case, being aware of the Millennial generation's persistent challenge of the traditional life cycle is also of benefit and only possible in recent years as the young adult debates intensified. The Millennial link is moreover key because of the generational gap inherent to children's horror. As literature showed, academics and critics from the 1980s onward have already addressed these texts and concluded them to be unremarkable. As a Millennial researcher, my historical proximity to the subject reveals itself an advantage: my first-hand experience of being a child in the 1990s, even if in a different country, showed me the predominance of horror in the children's cultural landscape of the period without the interference of academic or otherwise adult-oriented views and considerations.

This close/distant relationship with children's horror is what presented me with the two observations I explore in this thesis. First, that what was virtually universally considered horror in the children's sphere was not so in the adult's sphere. And second, that the children's horror trend matches Millennial childhood not just in period (early 1980s to late 1990s) but also in its progression: in the early 1980s, when Millennials were entering childhood, children's horror was

surrounded by concerns about the ambiguous boundaries of childhood; in the mid-1980s, when the

first batch of Millennial children reached pre-adolescence, children's horror was concerned with the

transition from childhood to adolescence and the attempts to define this period of life; in the late

1990s, when most Millennials had become teenagers, children's horror declined as a trend. These

parallels suggest children's horror as a hub for period-specific struggles over childhood. Once these

anxieties were culturally resolved, the trend's relevance in the adult sphere diminished (no social or

academic debate), even as its presence continued to be steady, albeit low-key, in the children's

sphere: children still read *Goosebumps* and the cinema occasionally hears an echo of children's

horror, as in Joe Dante's *The Hole* (2009) or the recent *The Visit* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2015).

In this thesis I propose a timeline of the children's horror trend and demonstrate its connection to

important social, cultural and industrial changes taking place in America during this period. By

charting this trend's milestones between 1980 and 1997, I argue that children's horror negotiated

changing attitudes towards children and horror, breaking away from traditional notions of childhood

to establish the pre-teen as a new Millennial demographic. Thus my aims for this project are three-

fold: to provide an in-depth account of the children's horror trend and highlight its cultural and

industrial significance; to examine the re-configuration of childhood that took place during this

period and introduced the figure of the pre-teen; and to investigate the impact of these shifts in

notions of boundaries of horror and of childhood.

Toward a definition of children's horror

Before I can begin an analysis of the children's horror trend, I must clarify my terms. As a trend,

children's horror is best described as a powerful burst, an explosion of horror-themed material that

spilled into virtually every sphere of children's culture — films, television, books, games, toys and

others — during the 1980s and 1990s. It included films such as Disney's *The Watcher in the Woods*

(John Hough, 1980), *The Black Caldron* (Ted Berman & Richard Rich, 1985), *Something Wicked This Way Comes (Jack Clayton, 1983)* and *Little Monsters* (Richard Greenberg, 1989), plus *Silver Bullet* (Daniel Attias, 1985), *Critters* (Stephen Herek, 1986) and its sequels, *Gremlins* (Joe Dante, 1984) and *Casper* (Brad Silberling, 1995), as well as many others. In television, children's horror was exemplified by programmes such as *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* or *Eerie, Indiana* (NBC, 1991-1992), and it was represented in literature by series like *Goosebumps* and others by R.L. Stine or Christopher Pike. There were also VHS board games like *Nightmare* (Mattel, 1991), as well as other games, books and toys derived from the franchises mentioned above. Children's horror rose abruptly and turbulently in the 1980s, shot up in popularity in the mid-1990s, and just as quickly spiraled down in the later years of the decade, becoming reduced to sporadic echoes in the 2000s and 2010s — *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009), *ParaNorman* (Chris Butler & Sam Fell, 2012), and the *Goosebumps: Horrorland* series (2008-2012), among others.

While this description provides some context on the breath of children's horror, I feel the need to provide the reader with a more detailed definition that can guide this thesis, especially as there are currently no good studies on children's horror that I can evoke. My preferred term for this subject is children's horror over the two other possible denominations: youth-oriented horror, which is accurate but a mouthful, and kiddie horror, which has been popularised by the media in relation to *Goosebumps* and *Gremlins* but also knows popular use as reference to other kinds of films, usually with derogatory intent.[88] As with "Millennials" and "pre-teen," I choose children's horror for its neutrality and clarity. To be sure, children's horror is exactly what it sounds like: horror created with an audience of children in mind. Though I mainly focus on film, children's horror exists in a variety of media, as mentioned above.

In this thesis, two other terms appear associated to children's horror: cycle and trend. I have used cycle to refer to the group of children's horror films between 1980 and 1995 (for recent children's

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[88]For instance in Ammon Gilbert, "The 10 Most Anticipated Horror Films of 2010," SeattlePI, http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/movies/article/The-10-most-anticipated-horror-films-of-2010-888565.php.

horror films I have used the term echo). This film cycle comprises the bulk of my argument but is only a part of the children's horror trend, which was not limited to film and whose timeline extends to 1997. This relationship between the two is in line with Tino Balio's use of the terms in his history of Hollywood in the 1930s. For Balio, a trend represented "what was popular, when, and, where possible, why," and is identifiable through "barometers of public taste."[89] Trends are then subdivided into several different cycles, which "lasted until either the producer ran out of fresh ideas to sustain product variation or until a flood of imitations hit the market."[90] So, for instance, where Balio identified a comedy trend, he also subdivided it into separate cycles, such as screwball or sentimental comedy. However, Balio's terminology does not allow for multi-media distinctions, so I also take inspiration from Peter Stanfield's understanding of film cycles. In his book, *The Cool and the Crazy*, Stanfield analysed film cycles through

> films that explicitly exploited contemporary fads in music, the moral panic spurred by
>
> juvenile delinquency […], the popularity of alternative forms of entertainment, international
>
> events, and vogues in male apparel. In each study, the causal explanation behind the
>
> formation of a cycle and its associations with the topical is complex […] In a number of cases,
>
> the connection […] is filtered through synergies with other media forms […]; in others, it is
>
> tied to modifications in censorship and industry self-regulation, or to shifts in audience
>
> demographics[…], as well as to the more direct exploitation of contemporary events such as
>
> … moral panics.[91]

Stanfield's observations above are particularly fitting to a study of children's horror: as a trend, it spread across several media, one of which was film, where it manifested as a cycle (with close links to changes in the film industry, audience perceptions, moral panics and other socio-cultural issues).

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[89] Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 11.
[90] Ibid., 310.
[91] Peter Stanfield, *The Cool and the Crazy: Pop Fifties Cinema*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 13.

There is no "factor X"[92] to children's horror, but it is nevertheless useful to provide a guiding definition of the term. I use three main criteria to define children's horror:

First, the texts should generally have been perceived at their time of release by their creators and their audiences to have a connection to the horror genre, whether they articulated horror with humour (*The Monster Squad*), without it (*The Gate*), or with a mixed approach (*Gremlins*). Here I also include films which are playful in their use of horror motifs and tropes so long as these elements have a significant impact in the text's aesthetics (*The Nightmare Before Christmas*) and narrative (*The Witches*), and particularly if these elements were singled out for major use in advertising campaigns (*Casper*).

Second, children's horror stories are always told from the perspective of a child or a child-like character (be it monster, animal or adult in its appearance), and usually explore questions of childhood anxieties, particularly the on-set of puberty. This is in line with Bazalgette and Staples' suggestion that what distinguishes a children's film from a family film is that the former is entirely from the child's perspective.[93] There is, however, some cross-over between children's horror and the family film, and so stories are sometimes also told from a mixed perspective. Importantly, these cross-over examples remain focused on questions of childhood, childhood boundaries and parenting anxieties related to the on-set of puberty, as in *Gremlins* and *Casper*.

Third, children's horror is not associated with notions of education or quality. In the few instances where the connection exists, as in *Goosebumps* and Scholastic's "Reading is a scream" campaign, it is not central to consumption or reception. Accordingly, children's horror is circulated and made popular within children's culture primarily by the child consumers, their word of mouth and independent play, rather than being handed-down, suggested or otherwise pre-approved by parents

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[92] Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
[93] Cary Bazalgette; Terry Staples, "Unshrinking the Kids: Children's Cinema and the Family Film," in *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, ed. Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 96.

and educators. For this reason, ratings are of no consideration when identifying a children's horror film (though they are of tremendous significance when analysing it) — children's horror is usually rated PG or PG-13 but can also be found under the R rating (*Silver Bullet*, *The Lost Boys*).

For added clarity, I will note the types of films I do not include under the label of children's horror:

- Horror texts which "other" children or childhood, using them as horrific elements without inviting child identification. These narratives tend to explore adult anxieties unrelated to childhood and parenting, e.g. *The Omen*, *Child's Play*, *Village of the Damned*.Texts which invite identification with children, sometimes in scary contexts, but which do not use horror motifs in significant ways. Examples would be films like *The Goonies* (Richard Donner, 1985) and *E.T. - The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982).

- Horror films which are aimed primarily at teens and do not establish a simultaneous connection with children (unlike, for example, *The Lost Boys*). Examples would be the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* series.

- Horror or horror-themed texts with appeal to child audiences, but which do not feature children in the main roles, are not framed within a child's perspective and do not explore childhood anxieties and preoccupations. Examples would be *Ghostbusters (*Ivan Reitman, 1984) and *Beetlejuice* (Tim Burton, 1988).

- Horror films framed within the context of being "campy," not scary or of sub-standard quality. This includes U-rated old monster movies like *Creature From the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954) and the films usually labelled "kiddie horror" (used derogatorily), such as *Ghoulies* (Luca Bercovici, 1985) or *House*.

As the reader can see, this set of criteria applies only to a limited group of texts and an even narrower set of films. Although some earlier experimental texts can be found (such as *Phantasm* in 1979) and there are a few examples in the 2000s and 2010s, the bulk of these titles as well as the

peak of their popularity, social relevance and industrial impact exist in the 1984-1997 period, the time frame of the first Millennials' childhood and pre-teen years.

It is important to note here a further distinction between the children's horror cycle and other trends of the period. Film in the 1980s was generally youth-focused and there are many examples of films outside of the horror genre that fit some of the criteria specified above, especially a child's point of view and a general preoccupation with child empowerment, particularly in the science fiction and fantasy genres (e.g., *Explorers* [Joe Dante, 1985], *The NeverEnding Story* [Wolfgang Petersen, 1984]). What is different about horror is its cultural baggage. Fantasy and science fiction have always enjoyed an unproblematic association with child audiences, free from bans and moral panics, and while the 1980s and 1990s might have been a period during which this association was more visible, these films were not greeted with ambivalence over suitability or seen to be a challenge to social order, unlike many children's horror titles.

Methodology and structure

The reader will have gathered from the rest of this introduction that I place high value on contextual awareness. This is because the "meaning" of a text is flexible; as Janet Staiger has demonstrated in her work, it is the "contextual factors [and not the] textual materials or reader psychologies [that are] most important in the reading process or interpretation."[94] As an example, consider *Gremlins*, which has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity within the current wave of 1980s nostalgia. Today's context, as well as the nostalgia which surrounds it, has effected some significant changes in how *Gremlins* is perceived: the first film and its sequel are now one in collective memory ("the *Gremlins* franchise"), with the result of the first film's humour being much highlighted by its sequel and its horror much downplayed by today's advanced technology and expectations of horror. The

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[94] Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), xi.

franchise's prestige is evident in its recent merchandise line, popular in shop's physical and online shelves, even though the last film release was over two decades ago. This line targets adult collectors with large, elaborate and expensive action figures (often minimally articulated or not at all, meant for the display cabinet rather than the playroom), board games and "Collector's Edition" card games, as well as fashionable vintage-look t-shirts and other memorabilia based on all the main gremlins — a vast difference from the original merchandise lines of the 1980s, aimed at children and almost exclusively based on Gizmo. Furthermore, the original and rather dominating objections to violence and the resulting PG-13 controversy are almost entirely irrelevant for contemporary consumers of this franchise.

Similarly, *Goosebumps* today holds a much different cultural status than it did in the 1990s. Although it is still published, and R.L. Stine is still a popular author, it is no longer a children's culture phenomenon and has not been in the children's bestselling list for many years. Unlike *Gremlins*, *Goosebumps* does not have mainstream or cult status, or hold any prestige with adult collectors today, yet it was undeniably "cool" in the 1990s (a status equivalent to prestigious in the children's world, perhaps). As the physical texts of either franchise have not changed since their original release dates, the only explanation for these radical shifts in cultural perception must be found in their different historical contexts.

To account for this, reception studies is a large part of my methodological approach in this study. In Staiger's description of reception studies, the object is to research "the history of the interactions between real readers and texts, actual spectators and films." Because reception studies is history and not philosophy, it "does not attempt to construct a generalized, systematic explanation of how individuals might have comprehended texts, and possibly someday will, but rather how they actually have understood them."[95] This historical approach seems well-suited to the study of children's horror not just because it bridges cultural distance but also because it addresses the main issue of

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[95] Ibid., 8.

current literature on the topic, i.e. the immediate assumption that children's horror is not horror.

Here, it is useful to refer to Mark Jancovich's comments on the important role cultural struggles play

in genre definitions. Jancovich pointed out the possibility of "violent disagreements among the

consumers of a specific genre over their respective constructions of the field," noting the

importance of notions of legitimacy and authenticity as "each group distinguishes between the 'real'

and 'authentic' examples of a genre and its 'inauthentic' appropriation. On occasions, this distinction

becomes a matter of exclusion from the category."[96] Thus he concluded:

> *The mediation of* The Silence of the Lambs *illustrates the ways in which genre distinctions*
>
> *operate not to designate or describe a fixed class of texts, but as terms that are constantly*
>
> *and inevitably in a process of contestation. Imbricated in that contest are questions of*
>
> *cultural value, privilege and the authority to determine cultural legitimacy through the act of*
>
> *genre definition. Rather than horror having a single meaning, different social groups*
>
> *construct it in different, competing ways as they seek to identify with or distance themselves*
>
> *from the term, and associate different texts with these constructions of horror.[97]*

Following Jancovich's lead, my bid in this thesis is less to return a set of texts to the horror canon

than it is to explore the reasons for their ambiguous position. To this end, I have mainly based my

work on historical reviews. As Barbara Klinger noted, film reviews "do more than provide

information about how a particular film was received, they offer some insight into broader cultural

attitudes."[98] Therefore, I have made extensive use of reviews and other features from publications

with measured social or industrial relevance, such as The New York Times and Variety, as evidence of

the historical social, cultural and industrial concerns expressed around children's horror. There is an

emphasis on the work of famous critics like Roger Ebert, Vincent Canby or Peter Travers, as these

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[96] Mark Jancovich, "Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinctions in the Mediation of the Silence of the Lambs," in *Horror, the Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 152.
[97] Ibid., 159.
[98] Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 70.

were "primary public tastemakers"[99] with significant influence. For the most part I used North

American items, to keep within the original geographical and cultural context of the children's horror

trend, but I have also referred to British reviews where relevant.

To complement this, I have also analysed promotional material such as posters, trailer, merchandise

lines and other marketing campaigns, in order to understand who the intended audience might have

been and how the film's producers chose to address it. This exercise, I believe, can help clarify the

reviews by demonstrating how producers positioned their material in relation to social debates. For

the same reason, I have also sought interviews with cast, crew and authors, DVD commentaries and

other press articles, to gain insights into the texts' production context, including pre-production

events, such as script changes and the reasons behind them. I have made use of many online

archives and other online sources which have had their credibility verified by others.[100]

If the children's horror trend is to be completely contextualised, its internal shape must also be

considered. The tone, themes and representations in children's horror narratives provide important

clues to the interpretation of reviews and also clarify notions of audience and audience address,

consequently being of great interest to the analysis of a changing childhood. Moreover, the themes

explored in children's horror suggest emotional richness to the pre-teen demographic,

demonstrating the shortcomings of a strictly market-driven view of this group and its culture.

Consequently, I have also included an element of textual analysis throughout, focusing primarily on

representations of childhood and the ideological foundations of children's horror narratives.

The thesis is composed of six chapters, each containing one or more case studies, presented

chronologically from 1980 to 1997. Case studies have been included based on their ability to clearly

demonstrate both a milestone for the children's horror trend and a moment of change for childhood

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Chapter 1, for example, makes extensive use of information found in the archives of journalist Scott Bosco's now-abandoned website, used as a source in Joseph Stannard, "Out of the Woods," *Sight and Sound*, March 2011.

and horror. There has been no interference on my part to attempt balance or variety, two arbitrary criteria that would have compromised the rigour of this analysis, and as a result this thesis leans heavily toward the film side of the children's horror trend. This merely reflects the position of "hot spots" in the children's horror timeline, the implications of which are discussed in my argument, and is not representative of a bias toward film.

The first three chapters focus on the early days of children's horror and on the period around the creation of PG-13, when the concepts of childhood and horror were intensely debated. Chapter 1 proposes Disney's *The Watcher in the Woods* as a starting point for the children's horror trend and highlights the cultural conflicts inherent to the combination of children and horror. Chapter 2 concentrates on PG-13 and the three films that led directly to its introduction (*Poltergeist*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins*), challenging current thinking about the history of the ratings and proposing PG-13 as the signpost of a re-structured and re-segmented childhood. Chapter 3 examines the immediate effects of new boundaries for horror and childhood in *The Gate*, which reveal a deep connection between children's horror and pre-teens, and explores the resulting struggles within the horror genre more broadly.

The next two chapters focus on the longer-term effects of children's horror legitimisation and chart its decline in the 1990s. In small disruption to the chronological focus of the rest of the thesis, these chapters focus on simultaneous transformations, bifurcating the thesis's parallel focus on horror and the pre-teen: while chapter 4 is more concerned with notions of horror, chapter 5 focuses more intently on the pre-teen demographic. Thus chapter 4 notes the way children's horror became distanced from the horror genre through titles like *Nightmare Before Christmas*, which adhere to adult values instead of pre-teen perspectives, highlighting the persistent struggles between horror and child audiences. Chapter 5 follows children's horror transformation into family horror in *Casper*, suggesting this as a confirmation of the pre-teen's cultural integration as well as the end of the children's horror film cycle.

Lastly, chapter 6 addresses the non-theatrical side of the children's horror trend. It analyses the dominating presence of the *Goosebumps* franchise, confirming puberty as the heart of children's horror and suggesting its intrinsic incompatibility with the cinema. The thesis conclusion sums up my argument, reaffirms its implications and suggests paths for future research.

<u>Chapter One</u>

Troubled beginnings: the (im)possibility of children's horror in Disney's *The Watcher in the Woods*

In 1980, Disney released *The Watcher in the Woods* (John Hough) to great hype and expectation. The feature was an unprecedented foray into the horror genre, intense enough to earn Disney one of its first PG certificates. The studio's intention was to revitalise its film division by "scar[ing] the hell out of them,"[101] but the production struggled with the horror elements, working through cuts and changes to make the film more family-friendly. In the end, *The Watcher* was badly received by critics who declared themselves confused at once by the film's narrative, nonsensical after so many changes, and its uneven tone. Disney's hopes for *The Watcher*, its conflicted decisions during production, and the public's ultimate rejection thus combined in an anxious process of negotiation. What are the cultural, social and industrial implications of this tense introduction of horror to mainstream family entertainment?

After the death of Walt Disney in 1966, the Disney company struggled for many years. The film division, particularly, was no longer profitable, mostly turning out lukewarm features or box-office failures. In the words of reporter and author Ron Grover, "the problem was that America's viewing public had changed, but Disney hadn't."[102] Not only had families changed, in a climate of declining birth rates, youngsters "seemed to be growing up faster, demanding more sophistication in their

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[101] Aljean Harmetz, "Another Disney Break with Tradition: Independent Producer to Film for Studio," *The Miami News*, March 1980.
[102] Ron Grover, *The Disney Touch: Disney, Abc & the Quest for the World's Greatest Media Empire* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 8; ibid.

movies."[103] Unable or unwilling to adapt, Disney remained in a state of "creative lethargy,"[104] intent

on making only the kinds of films Walt would have approve, wholesome and rated G. In the 1970s,

however, the intention to breathe new life into the studio was renewed. Working from the belief

that audiences now demanded greater intensity from films, the studio produced a series of high

budget projects that aimed for the PG rating — a first for Disney — and explored new areas of

filmmaking so far untouched by the company. The first of these projects was *The Black Hole* (Gary

Nelson, 1979), a science fiction adventure heavy on technology and special effects. The second was

The Watcher in the Woods, Disney's first horror film and one of the earliest children's horror

attempts.

The novel it was based on, *A Watcher in the Woods* by Florence Engel Randall, was first picked up by

producer Tom Leetch. He brought it to the studio with an unlikely pitch: "This could be our

Exorcist."[105] The horror elements of the film went on to become one of the main selling points,

strongly highlighted in promotional material and press kits. Director John Hough has talked about

Disney's enthusiasm for and faith in this project: "Disney were very proud of this film. […] I was

getting nothing but messages of encouragement from them, and how excited and pleased they were

with the whole film up to this point." He continued, "They had a lot at stake and full marks in and

they were willing to spend the money and keep their belief in the project going. They did."[106]

Yet, despite Disney's strong belief that a horror film might improve the studio's situation, critics and

audiences were not convinced. The reviews were so bad Disney was forced to withdraw *The*

Watcher. "Everybody flew back the next morning to Los Angeles to lick their wounds and to rethink

on what to do with the film," Hough has commented, also adding: "They believed in the film enough,

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[103] Bart Mills, "Disney Looks for a Happy Ending to Its Grim Fairy Tale," *American Film*, July-August 1982, 1.
[104] Grover, *The Disney Touch: Disney, Abc & the Quest for the World's Greatest Media Empire*, 8.
[105] Scott Michael Bosco, "The Watcher in the Woods: The Mystery Behind the Mystery," in *Digital Cinema*.
[106] John Hough, "Commentary on Alternate Ending 2," in *The Watcher in the Woods* (Starz/ Anchor Bay, 2002).

I'm glad to say. They stayed with it."[107] The film was edited, its ending cut, and a new one re-shot; a year later, the film was re-released, to only marginally better critical reception.

The Watcher's poor performance caused it to fade fast in the public's memory. Journalistic retrospective work on Disney, even that written close to the film's release, as was the case with Bart Mills' article for American Film, tended to miss *The Watcher* entirely. Mills described *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (Jack Clayton, 1983) with an allusion to "the kind of phantasmagorical menace often suggested in Disney cartoons, but so far never before included in its live-action product — unless you count dear sweet Bill Cosby playing the Devil."[108] This amnesia is telling of *The Watcher*'s failure to make an impact in popular culture in spite of its position as one of Disney's first PG films, one of the studio's most troubled and critically derided productions and one of Disney's most surprising attempts at branching out.

These credentials have, however, given *The Watcher in the Woods* a special identity as cult object. In 2002, Anchor Bay released a Special DVD Edition, marketed and packaged for a niche audience of cult fans as well as fans of Disney and film more broadly. The cover and back-cover include prominent references to Bette Davis and her established position in film history, as well as quotes on the film's peculiar past: "The most legendary monster of all time can now be seen for the first time." Inside, a twenty-page booklet is included, complete with a lengthy introduction, full credits list, interviews with cast and crew as well as a page for memories of Bette Davis. The extras likewise suggest a specialised audience of collectors, film aficionados and those interested in the events of this production: trailers, a rare television spot and two alternate endings, plus commentaries by director John Hough. Nearly ten years after this release, a retrospective piece appeared in Sight and Sound, the official publication of the British Film Institute, catering for a specialised audience of film aficionados. It detailed the controversial history of "Disney's cult 1980 fantasy, 'The Watcher in the Woods'," which Joseph Stannard, the author, described as "a beautifully shot, well-acted […] curio,

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Mills, "Disney Looks for a Happy Ending to Its Grim Fairy Tale," 53.

an oddball artefact" and "a haunting, unusual film, steeped in a strange magic that's only enhanced by the dense thicket of rumour and myth that surrounds it."[109] Much like the DVD package, Stannard romanticised *The Watcher* as a cult object and, in so doing, dislodged it from its historical context. The missing allusions to Disney's crisis and to the cultural environment of the late 1970s and early 1980s ultimately reconfigured *The Watcher in the Woods*, allowing it to become a timeless object but also eclipsing its ability to provide commentary on extra-textual subjects.

If *The Watcher in the Woods* is an exotic relic of conflicts past, it must also be the mark of a suitable place for academic excavation, yet scholarly references are a mirage; the film is cited exclusively to illustrate the extent of Disney's failures in the period between Walt's death and Michael Eisner's leadership.[110] But although *The Watcher* shares similarities with the other failed Disney efforts of this period, it is not in any way similar to them. Along with *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (Jack Clayton, 1983) and *The Black Cauldron* (1985), *The Watcher in the Woods* is part of a restricted and time-specific group of features that illustrate Disney's desires to branch out into the horror genre. This particularity is important. Why would Disney, a studio so deeply rooted in notions of family values and wholesomeness, turn to a genre popularly associated with the exact opposite? Why was it so invested in this pursuit, especially as the most popular trope in horror during this period was the figure of the evil child, a portrait so far removed from Disney's usual innocent and joyous children? These incongruities in studio strategy at once raise questions about the internal state of the Disney company and about American society more broadly. Indeed, although *The Watcher in the Woods* is an important, albeit uncredited, part of what Telotte terms Disney's "course correction,"[111] it also signposts the beginning of a shift that goes far beyond the Disney company and into the heart of western culture, raising questions about childhood, the horror genre and the (im)possibility of joining the two.

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[109] Stannard, "Out of the Woods."
[110] *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin (London: Routledge, 1994), 78, 98.
[111] J. P. Telotte, *The Mouse Machine: Disney and Technology* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 141.

In this chapter I will use *The Watcher in the Woods* as a probe into the filmmaking industry, the society and the culture of the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To this end, I will explore the two main cues given by the film itself: its pivotal and very unusual position as a Disney horror film, and its tense production and reception history. My analysis will open up from a close look at these two elements into a broader discussion of the anxieties expressed within *The Watcher* and their position as early indicators of changes in the concept of childhood, as well as the prelude to the children's horror trend.

Two captains sink the ship: horror and anti-horror in *The Watcher*

From early in its production stage, it was clear that the main selling point of *The Watcher in the Woods* was going to be its affiliation with the horror genre. Co-producer Tom Leetch, the first to become interested in adapting Florence Engel Randall's novel, pitched it to executive producer Ron Miller with an enthusiastic "This could be our *Exorcist*,"[112] and Miller in turn spoke to the press with excitement: "We're going to scare the hell out of them this summer with a sort of horror story, 'Watcher in the Woods.'"[113] To achieve this, Miller populated the film's production with experienced horror people: John Hough to direct, who had previously done horror and suspense in *Eyewitness* (1970), *Twins of Evil* (1971), which he directed for the famous Hammer studios, and *The Legend of Hell House* (1973); and to star, Bette Davis, who had built a strong connection with horror in the 1960s and 1970s with films such as the vastly successful *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962) and its sequel *Hush… Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964), the Hammer production *The Nanny* (Seth Holt, 1965) and some television work in *Scream, Pretty Peggy* (Gordon Hessler, 1973) and the mini-series *The Dark Secret of Harvest Home* (Universal TV, 1978). Additional stars included the young Kyle Richards, who played a part in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), and

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[112] Bosco, "The Watcher in the Woods: The Mystery Behind the Mystery."
[113] Harmetz, "Another Disney Break with Tradition: Independent Producer to Film for Studio."

David McCallum, who was not a horror actor but had recently starred in *Frankenstein: The True Story* (Jack Smight, 1973).

Moreover, not only did the film share a location with horror classic *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), one of its other locations was also allegedly haunted, a detail the press kit emphasised to reporters — the film was billed as "one of the most haunting and powerful mysteries ever created by Walt Disney Productions."[114] The posters promised "a masterpiece of suspense!" and featured a ghostly face haunting the eerie woods. Some displayed the line "It is *not* a fairy tale" — repeated also in the trailers' ominous narration, played over the film's most suspenseful images and the sound of violins. This promotional emphasis implies a strong confidence on Disney's part that the horror elements would successfully sell the film. The reality of the production, however, tells a different story — of doubt, reluctance and much struggle. In a retrospective piece for Sight and Sound, Joseph Stannard wrote of the tales "of tension on the set involving an irritable Bette Davis, nervous executives and an embattled director."[115] Further details were delivered by journalist Scott Michael Bosco, who provided research for the DVD release of *The Watcher in the Woods* and was a personal friend of producer Tom Leetch. In his tell-all online account of *The Watcher*'s history, Bosco revealed how he "learned from cast members of the tenuous atmosphere which existed during the production," and accused Ron Miller of having "constantly interfered with the filming of scenes, afraid of their intensity. […] Co-producer Leetch would come head to head with Miller fighting for his vision while director John Hough would step aside. […] Since Miller was head of the studio, he won his way."[116]

Director John Hough told a slightly different version of the events: "I've got no complaints against Disney whatsoever. It was pure circumstance that worked against me [in making the film

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[114] Cheri Dubey, *"The Watcher in the Woods" Production Notes* (1980), http://docslide.us/documents/the-watcher-in-the-woods-press-kit.html.
[115] Stannard, "Out of the Woods."
[116] Bosco, "The Watcher in the Woods: The Mystery Behind the Mystery."

unsuccessful]."[117] In his commentary of the film, Hough never mentions interference from the studio

or the producers, although actress Carroll Baker has stated that "he was working under an awful lot

of pressure."[118] In response to Hough's comments, Bosco wrote: "He is being cordial, I don't have to

be. I've never been on their payroll. Besides, even if he were [honest] his words would have been

edited, as was my writing [for the Anchor Bay DVD booklet]."[119] In support to Bosco's claims, there is

indeed a sense of regret in Hough's commentary, as the director repeatedly talks about

"circumstance" working against him, particularly where the ending was concerned — Hough was

never consulted about those changes.[120] "I still feel now if I could get that footage of the alien

[claimed lost by Disney]," Hough said sorrowfully for the DVD release. "I could still make this alien

work. It took me quite a while to get over this."[121]

Intrigue aside, there are several known instances of changes imposed to the script and on set which

can be attributed to Ron Miller, as well as evidence of his clashes with Tom Leetch. The

modifications all share in common a strong preoccupation with reducing the film's intensity and its

horror. The first changes took place immediately at pre-production level. According to John Hough,

the script written by Brian Clemens was "considered too dark and too threatening and black, as

[Disney] called it." Another writer, Rosemary Anne Sisson, was then brought in "to really lighten the

script" and take out "a lot of the most sinister things that Brian had put in." Hough also talked about

the reasons behind these changes, and the extent to which they were important:

> *Their market was children and a young audience, so they were caught between how scary*
>
> *and sinister the film could be and how frightening […]. This was a constant source of*

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[117] Hough, "Commentary on Alternate Ending 2."
[118] Scott Michael Bosco, *The Watcher in the Woods - the Mystery Disclosed Booklet* (Anchor Bay Entertainment, Inc., 2002).
[119] "The Watcher in the Woods: The Mystery Behind the Mystery."
[120] *The Watcher in the Woods - the Mystery Disclosed Booklet*.
[121] John Hough, "Commentary on Alternate Ending 1," in *The Watcher in the Woods* (Starz/ Anchor Bay, 2002).

discussion, what level we should pitch the film at. I think they did have trepidation at the

time.[122]

Actress Kyle Richards has also talked about this topic as a constant source of discussion between the two producers, Miller and Leetch. She recounted an especially problematic scene, in which the mother was meant to slap Jan after an argument about Karen's disappearance — "Oh boy did they have a debate about that!"[123] In the end, it was decided that Carroll Baker's character would shake Jan by the shoulders instead of slapping her, to tone the scene down. Interestingly, Richards, who was a child at the time, personally disagreed with their decision — "I've always thought it just wasn't enough"[124] — casting some doubt on the effectiveness of Disney's strategy during this production.

Other, much bigger changes were made — and unusually, these were carried out after the film's release. The first of these had to with the opening sequence, the second with the ending. The original opening has been described by Scott Bosco:

> *A small girl is seen in the woods playing with a doll. The WATCHER'S presence (a roving*
>
> *camera POV) sneaks up to the girl from behind. She suddenly turns to the camera and*
>
> *screams, dropping her doll and running off. The camera changes its view from the running*
>
> *girl to the doll. There is a growl, the doll floats upward, becoming air borne, and is swiftly*
>
> *launched against a tree where it is struck by a blue beam of light igniting it. The Main Titles*
>
> *are played over the burning doll face which melts as the credits continue accompanied by a*
>
> *striking "psycho-like" musical strings.*[125]

This was replaced with a montage of daytime shots of the woods over tranquil (if slightly eerie) music, which cut straight to the family's introductory scene. This new opening is much milder and, being far less reminiscent of films like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Psycho* (Alfred

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[122] Film Commentary, (Starz/ Anchor Bay, 2002).
[123] Bosco, *The Watcher in the Woods - the Mystery Disclosed Booklet*.
[124] Ibid.
[125] "The Watcher in the Woods: The Mystery Behind the Mystery."

Hitchcock, 1960), affects the tone of *The Watcher* accordingly — where the original ending would prime audiences for an intense film, the second version set up a mellower and slower-burning narrative. The decision to change it has been strongly criticised by Bosco:

> *It would seem Disney would rather have newly animated characters talk with the lingo of crack dealers than showing a doll burning. I suppose it was better to hear an African helicopter pilot say 'I'd whip the bitch!', as in the film BABY: SECRET OF THE LOST LEGEND [B.W.L. Norton, 1985] or for that matter have winged harpies, boldly nude, exposing their pink nipples in close-up as in FANTASIA [Norm Ferguson, 1940].*[126]

If these examples do make Disney appear inconsistent, it is also true that the symbolism of a burning doll sets it clearly apart from bad language and nipples. Dolls are so closely associated with childhood that to show the extended and explicit destruction of one could raise uncomfortable associations with the destruction of childhood and children's innocence. As the Disney brand was built on ideals of childhood and family values, this connotation could be especially damaging. The studio's dilemma is apparent, then: how to push the boundaries of Disney films through the horror genre without crossing the line of what the audience expected from the studio and its ideology? The problem was noted by reviewer Bill Marshall of Britain's Monthly Film Bulletin: "It is not surprising, given the contradictory notion of a Disney horror movie, to find that, for all its atmospheric shots […], *The Watcher in the Woods* is really an anti-horror exercise."[127] Marshall's description strikes me as accurate — for every horror element in the script there was an effort to tone it down, erase it or detach it from ideas of the supernatural and, indeed, from the horror genre itself. One final example will demonstrate the extent of this anti-horror drive, as well as its repercussions in the film's tone and narrative cohesion: *The Watcher*'s much-debated and much-derided ending.

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Quoted in Stannard, "Out of the Woods."

The ending was a point of contention between Leetch and Miller from early stages and into the production period itself. "The real suspense was how we were going to end it," actress Lynn-Holly Johnson has said in interview. "[It] was still being discussed between the two producers."[128] Eventually, the ending was agreed between Leetch and Miller. It was to contain a sequence full of special effects depicting what happened to Jan and Karen after the successful ritual: Jan would be taken by the Watcher to The Other World, where his spaceship had crashed and where Karen was frozen in time and space; with Jan's help, Karen would be restored back to Earth, switching places with the Watcher. However, the special effects were not completed in time for the film's release, which had been strategically tied to the 50th anniversary of Bette Davis' career. Instead of waiting for the finished product, Disney decided to simply cut the entire sequence and release the film without it.

Unfortunately, the deleted sequence was crucial to the film's narrative and the released film both confused and insulted the critics who previewed it. According to Scott Bosco, who was present at the first screening, critics seemed to be enjoying the film up until the final act. In his report, Bosco described how the audience "leaned forward with expectation" and "lurched back into their seats, with a gasp" at the Watcher's reveal, applauding. "I had not experienced a preview response like that since ALIEN [Ridley Scott, 1979], when the creature broke out from John Hurt's chest," Bosco wrote. The problem, he continued, was when the film ended and "no one had understood exactly what had transpired." The situation worsened during the Q&A that followed the screening, in which Lynn-Holly Johnson was asked "what was it they had just seen." The actress responded with a summary of The Other World Sequence, until "a press agent quickly covered the mic, pulled Lynn-Holly away, and whispered something to her. Returning to the mic, Lynn-Holly responded with a slight giggle, 'But you didn't see that.' A murmur of disbelief expelled from the audience."[129]

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[128] Bosco, *The Watcher in the Woods - the Mystery Disclosed Booklet*.
[129] "The Watcher in the Woods: The Mystery Behind the Mystery."

Critical reactions corroborate Bosco's account. Vincent Canby's review, often quoted by other

reviewers contained the following sharp remarks: "I challenge even the most indulgent fan to give a

coherent translation of what passes for an explanation at the end. The movie's metaphysics, bogus

anyway, are not helped by the appearance of a creature that looks as if it had been stolen from a

Chinese New Year's parade."[130] Another critic, Ed Blank of The Pittsburgh Press, wrote:

> *During the ritual, something resembling a crab in seaweed bobbed into view briefly. We*
>
> *knew to expect something macabre, but the film — essentially a ghost story — had*
>
> *introduced at the 11th hour a creature appropriate to a horror flick. In doing so, it broke faith*
>
> *with the audience by violating inner logic.*[131]

Both critics address the narrative incoherency of the film and, to a lesser degree, the problems with

the special effects for the Watcher creature. Blank's review is especially striking, as it addresses

Disney's "anti-horror" dilemma and the compromises between Disney's desire to make a horror film

and its inability to commit to its specifications. The importance of the ending in this situation was

not ignored by the filmmakers. After Disney withdrew the film, Harrison Ellenshaw was hired to

rework the ending. In interview, he has said that he was handed a pile of ideas for new endings —

"roughly 152" — and "they were all awful." The problem for Ellenshaw was that in the first version,

"[the Watcher] came across too much as a monster. I thought making it more of a 'ghost' film with a

Watcher that was less concrete added to [it], even though that's still science fiction."[132]

The curious thing about these statements is Ellenshaw's distancing of *The Watcher* from the horror

genre, progressively approximating it to science fiction instead. Producer Tom Leetch has also

echoed this intention, when addressing the differences between the two endings; the first

supernatural, the second alien. "We dealt with it on a much more basic level as we toned down the

film each time," Leetch has said. The progressively reduced intensity was in order to leave no doubts

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[130] Aljean Harmetz, "'Watcher in Woods,' Revised $1 Million Worth, Tries Again," in *The New York Times* (1981).
[131] Ed Blank, "Bette Davis Superb; 'Watcher' Average," *The Pittsburgh Press*, February 1 1982.
[132] Scott Michael Bosco, "Interview with Harrison Ellenshaw," in *Digital Cinema*.

that "there was nothing bad about it" and that "it had not been a bad experience for the young girl [Karen]." Leetch continued: "[We kept] trying to figure out a way to shoot it pictorially to get it across to the audience that she wasn't harmed. The ending was meant to be an uplifting happy one." When asked why The Other World Sequence was not used in the film's final cut, Leetch was vague: "Well, those are hard questions to answer." Then, hinting at his disagreements with Disney's president, Ron Miller, he added, "We had, I must admit, a difficulty in coming to an agreement with the powers that were involved as to what was correct and wasn't. […] Our backs were up against a wall and we had to make choices."[133]

Unfortunately once again, the second ending was nearly as unsuccessful as the first. In the words of critic Ed Blank, Disney's alleged $1 million investment in the new cut meant "they must have had a $950,000 lunch break."[134] For one reviewer, it was "one of the most baffling denouements ever,"[135] for another it "looks hopelessly tacked on" with "virtually nothing to do with the character relationships built up in the earlier going. It's a letdown."[136] Yet again, the complaints referred mainly to narrative incoherence of the ending, and the misleading way it sets up a horror story only to climax as something else — as retrospective critic Joseph Stannard put it, "the film seems to be building to an epic revelation that never materialises, and while the climatic ritual is staged with the intensity of a Hammer classic, the resolution takes place, in stereotypically Disney style, amid hugs and smiles."[137] In other words, it remained an "anti-horror exercise."

Disney has never acknowledged any reason for *The Watcher*'s failure other than the initial special effects problems, a theory also supported by director Hough: "The public's and critics' reaction to the look of the alien was so horrendous — everybody started laughing practically. And so Disney withdrew the film from showing, and re-shot the ending without any special effects, without the

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[133] *The Watcher in the Woods - the Mystery Disclosed Booklet*.
[134] Blank, "Bette Davis Superb; 'Watcher' Average."
[135] Terry Pace, "In Review: Disney Staying in Woods with 'Watcher'," *Times Daily*, November 27 1981.
[136] Edward Jones, "'Watcher in the Woods' Doesn't Measure Up," *The Free Lance-Star*, October 15 1981.
[137] Stannard, "Out of the Woods."

alien."[138] However, my analysis of the film's production history and its critical reception does not support this theory, instead pointing toward Disney's struggles with horror as the culprit, suggesting that change was underway in society's perceptions of horror: children were becoming acceptable target audiences for the genre, but not without restraints. Exactly where and how these restraints had to be enforced, however, was a great source of tension and anxiety.

Following the lead: horror, ideology and representations of children

As well as criticising the ending and its lack of narrative logic, reviewers also pointed out the lack of originality in *The Watcher*. Vincent Canby wrote of the "standard spook-movie effects,"[139] and Terry Pace noted the "abundance of cliché-ridden dialogue" in the "trite" screenplay, faults he attributed to the writer's lack of inventiveness: "Clemens settles for playing it safe and relies on standard-formulae dialogue."[140] Similarly, for George Hatza of the Reading Eagle, Disney's approach in *The Watcher* was not only old and tired but also far from genuine: "In short, every trite ghost-story routine is pulled out of mothballs in an attempt to cash in on the horror craze."[141] These comments reaffirm the problems already discussed in the last section, while also pointing to a new issue: in its effort to do horror, Disney not only produced an anti-horror film but also one that was far from fresh on its debut.

The situation might be explained by the studio's lack of familiarity with the genre but also from its more broad approach to the production. Tom Leetch's comparison to *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) effectively expresses the producer's vision for *The Watcher*: a high-profit, serious horror film, with the potential to be controversial and generate a lot of publicity for the studio. But it also suggests a concept of horror that was very strongly influenced by what was popular at the time — in

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[138] Hough, *Film Commentary*.

[139] Vincent Canby, "Disney Movie Needs Ghost Writer," *The Day*, April 17 1980.

[140] Pace, "In Review: Disney Staying in Woods with 'Watcher'."

[141] George Hatza, "Don't Be a Watcher of Disney's Barren 'Woods'," *Reading Eagle*, November 8 1981.

terms of themes, ideology and representation — without an awareness of horror as an evolving genre, mutating alongside the culture and society which produce it. Critical opinion was quick to point out the clichés in storytelling, but they are present more deeply, and with more ideological ramifications, in the way *The Watcher* represents its young characters. Indeed, these representations are heavily influenced by *The Exorcist* and other titles which were iconographic of the horror genre during the film's pre-production and production periods, such as *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961) and *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), which framed children in one of two possible ways: the blameless possessed child or, more commonly during the 1970s, the irredeemable malevolent child.

Evil children are found in horror as early as the 1950s, famously in *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1956), and all throughout the 1960s, climaxing with *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968). It is in the 1970s, however, that evil children become a staple of the horror genre, generating the motif described by Robin Wood as Terrible Child.[142] The success of novels and films focused on this motif was so large it is credited as responsible for making horror a more mainstream genre, providing an opportunity for writers like John Saul, Andrew Neiderman and Ruby Jean to build their careers on these stories.[143] This breach of the horror genre into the mainstream might have been what enticed Disney to pursue a horror production, following the lead and cues left by these previous very successful films. However, because *The Watcher* lifted its blueprint from the horror model of the 1970s, it also — perhaps inadvertently — replicated the genre's dominant ideology at this time, namely a distrust of children and their portrayal as Other. It is not difficult to anticipate how this might have been problematic in a Disney family film, designed to reach children as well as parents. The clash becomes explicit through an analysis of the film's young characters: sisters Ellie and Jan, as well as teenage Karen and her friends.

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[142] Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan-- and Beyond*, 75.
[143] Karen J. Renner, *The 'Evil Child' in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

I will start with Ellie, the younger sister who falls prey to the Watcher's benevolent possession, as she is the best illustration of this uneasy mesh of horror and family representations. Her character is underdeveloped and used mostly as a plot-furthering device (her trances are what provides clues and explanations) or for comic relief. The latter seems to fit the Disney comedy formula — Ellie's supposed excessive appetite is the source of jokes and humorous moments in the film — but the jokes are not always entirely good-natured. In one scene, Ellie asks her father how many sandwiches were brought to the picnic, to which he responds, "Four. Three for me and one for you." The punch line is Ellie's disappointed face, which the camera holds before closing the scene, suggesting not simply humour around a child's supposed greed but an instance of an adult exhibiting the same behaviour and getting the upper-hand. Another, crueller, example of humour directed against Ellie happens in the first act of the film, after the family hears Mrs. Aylwood decided to let them rent the house. The reason, they are told, is "your daughter." When Ellie asks if that was her, she gets a cold, dismissive response from the sales agent: "No, dear. Not you." Again, the scene is meant as comic relief but the humour stems only from Ellie's disappointment and humiliation.

This characteristic of the humour in *The Watcher* is consistent with the ideology behind the Terrible Child motif. According to William Paul, horror viewers gain pleasure from seeing the evil child punished; he demonstrates this impetus with several narrative examples, as well as the humorous post-credits scene in *The Bad Seed* (Marvyn LeRoy, 1956), where Terrible Child Rhoda is spanked by her mother.[144] The humour surrounding Ellie's character seems to be a lighter version of the same thing. Even if Ellie is never represented as evil, other than being called "monster" by her mother, she does display abnormal and dangerous behaviour throughout: she hears and obeys voices who, in her words, "tell her to do things" and is often possessed by spirits who may or may not be demons, causing her to spell words backwards (in a Disneyfied "Redrum" scene), to speak in different voices and to shout out (mild) abuse.

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[144] William Paul, *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 283.

On top of this, she is frighteningly unaware of it all. Ellie seems to exist in a place between two worlds and is often more in touch with the occult dimension than with reality around her — she hears Karen's song and the Watcher's voice but will not hear Jan speaking right next to her and in childish (or delusional) ways attributes the Watcher's warnings to Nerak the puppy. She is an open door between two worlds, a vessel so ripe for possession it easily brings the Watcher's unwanted presence into the family domain. As it turns out the Watcher is naturally benevolent but Ellie's innocence of the whole process renders her doubly threatening to the family's integrity: for allowing this trespasser in and for being incapable of controlling it.

If Ellie is a softened version of the horror model of the dangerous child, Jan is the exact opposite, a Disney take on spiritual possession. Like Ellie, she is naturally innocent and her innocence is what opens her up for contact with the other world. In contrast to her sister, however, Jan is fully aware and wilfully seeks out possession — though not by the Watcher but by Karen, the lost girl. The difference is crucial. While the Watcher is an alien monster and often threatening, Karen is throughout represented as the very incarnation of purity. She dresses all in white, blindfolded like Justice, and is never attributed any blame for her disappearance. Jan's quest for Karen is at the heart of the narrative, and the plot can easily be summarised as a progressive emptying of Jan's self so that Karen can take over and be restored to this world.

There are several suggestions of this exchange in the film. The first comes when Jan's reflection in the mirror disappears. She is distressed that she can't see herself in it, but the image is not completely empty: she sees Karen. Mirrors have been used in numerous children's fiction and folklore to represent links to other dimensions, as well as being signifiers of truth: in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Chris Columbus, 2001), the Mirror of Erised shows one's innermost desires; in *The NeverEnding Story* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1984) one's true inner self; in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (David Hand, 1937) the mirror answers truthfully; in the case of vampire lore, it shows one's (lack of a) true soul. When, later in the film, Jan is in the house of mirrors at the

funfair, she sees her reflection only as distorted images; when she finally reaches a mirror which reflects accurate but repeated images, her image is again substituted by Karen's. The mirror's "truth" is clear: Jan's identity is "wrong," Karen's is (over and over) "right."

Throughout, Jan is adamantly denied an identity, and pushed toward becoming Karen. Externally, she already resembles her, a fact noted by every character outside the family ("Is it the ghost of Karen I see?") and so central to the plot it is noted by the majority of reviewers. But the transformation is not complete until the end, when, in a reprise of the secret ceremony, Jan states loud and clear, "I'm Karen now!" Jan's irrelevance as herself is made clear in the ending (all versions): instead of being celebrated for having found Karen, Jan is either literally shoved aside or willingly removes herself from the scene as Karen makes her brilliant appearance in light and whiteness. The film's last words, out of Bette Davis' mouth, further underline the point: "Karen, you're home."

Jan's lack of credibility in the role of heroine has been voiced also by the filmmakers, who have suggested there were no plans to ever make Jan, the main character, central to the narrative. As Harrison Ellenshaw, who was in charge for the visual effects of the reworked ending, has said, "part of the reason to change the ending was to make Mike the hero"[145] — even though Mike is a secondary character in the film. The ease with which Jan is brushed aside only underlines what is already sensed through the narrative: Jan's only defining features are in what she lacks (agency, power, identity) and in what she is not (Karen).

Again, this situation is borrowed from 1970s horror films, in which children often figure prominently but are never the subject matter. Instead, films using the Terrible Child motif are about adult concerns, fears of responsibility, of change and the unknown, as well as anxieties about the family and current social values — case in point, *The Exorcist*. In *The Watcher*, the same is true: the narrative is not about Jan and Ellie solving a mystery but rather about the adult concern over the

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[145] Bosco, "Interview with Harrison Ellenshaw."

importance of restoring innocence to young people. Karen's teenage friends illustrate the point neatly, being represented as careless and irresponsible, all too eager to dwell on the forbidden and the occult. The result of their satanic-like ritual is their near-eternal damnation: Karen, an innocent victim, is lost in purgatory, while the others live in fear, guilt and trauma. Their characters reflect children's supposedly natural inclination for evil, disobedience and disruption; their wickedness corrected only after thirty years of punishment, when purity is at last restored to their lives.

Although children's innocence or lack thereof is an adult anxiety, it is often used thematically in children's films, and in most Disney productions. Nevertheless, its presence in *The Watcher* can be seen as a direct lift from horror because it is combined with another element of Ellie and Jan's representations, their otherness. In Ellie, this otherness is expressed in a conventional sense, as the character is modelled after the innocent possessed child of classic horror films. Jan's otherness is more unusual: in her quest for innocence, Jan rejects her identity in favour of receiving Karen's, effectively othering herself. As Wood and Paul have written, the otherness of children is not uncommon in horror of the 1960s-1970s period, and is in fact one of its main motifs. In children's films, however, it is rarely found. This is with good reason, as child characters in children's narratives are usually meant as points of identification for the child viewer — precisely the opposite of the intended reaction for characters who are other, a role usually reserved for the villains or the adult figures.

The introduction of othered characters, therefore, particularly when these are the film's main characters, raises questions about Disney's intended direction for *The Watcher*. It suggests a strict adherence to horror tropes without the adaptation process they would require to be successfully included in a family film. This thought was expressed by several reviewers who felt *The Watcher* merely duplicated already-seen horror material, as Terry Pace noted when he accused the screenwriter of "playing it safe."[146] Moreover, the problem with this copy-cat approach is that these

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[146] Pace, "In Review: Disney Staying in Woods with 'Watcher'."

horror tropes, in particular these representations, did not carry on being the genre's norm, further

dating the film. On the contrary, they were fast abandoned in the 1980s as the genre shifted its

attention to teenagers, a move reflected in its new characters and representations. Likewise in the

child-oriented productions that followed, representations of the child as other, particularly as

embodied by the Terrible Child, would be rejected and spoofed in favour of more active and

empowered child characters (see chapter 3).

A new problem begins to take shape. Not only was Disney struggling to find a balance between

pushing its boundaries and keeping to its traditions, it was also having trouble identifying the most

successful approach, following dying trends instead of taking the lead with new ones. Given Disney's

track record, few would realistically expect it to produce ground-breaking work in the genre of

horror on its first try; however, a studio that made its name catering for children and families could

be expected to be ahead of the curve with those audiences. That it was not exactly its problem:

Disney's intuition about children's predilection for horror and suspense — later to be proved correct

by others, as further chapters will demonstrate — was not followed through with the realisation that

a move into these uncharted territories would require different perspectives. The studio might have

realised audiences wanted something different but it still did not fully grasp that they were on their

way to *becoming* something different too.

Hints of a changing childhood: new audiences, new banners

The idea of children as a different demographic in the early 1980s did not escape critics, who were

often puzzled by the film's intentions for an audience. On the one hand, there was general

consensus on what *The Watcher* was: "the latest, half-hearted attempt by Walt Disney Productions

to improve its film-industry image by aiming toward a wider, more adult-oriented audience,"[147] or

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[147] Ibid.

"still another failure" of "Disney's desperate attempt."[148] On the other hand, there was not any clear

sense of who exactly the film meant to target. "I'm not sure at which market this film is intended,"

wrote Skip Sheffield for Boca Raton News. "It's too complicated for young kids and probably too mild

for teen-agers used to more spectacular cinematic thrills."[149] Similarly, a reviewer for The Lakeland

Ledger felt it was "too unconvincing for adults and too scary for youngsters,"[150] suggesting *The

Watcher* as a prisoner in a strange no-audience's-land.

To be sure, this situation was a direct result of the tug-o-war between producers but it is also

indicative of a curious cultural agreement of the period: in their reviews, critics largely assumed only

two essential audiences, "young kids" on one side and adults or teenagers on the other. Disney,

however, appeared to want to break this assumption with *The Watcher*. It diligently aired a warning

with each of the trailers released, proclaiming: "As proud as we are of THE WATCHER IN THE

WOODS, Walt Disney Productions strongly recommends that parents pre-screen this film for pre-

teens. It is not for small children!"

What stands out in Disney's announcement is the word "pre-teens." As a demographic, it is explicitly

separated from "small children" and implicitly separated from teenagers by its prefix. There is in this

warning a sense of the pre-teen as a distinct group, yet it is almost never mentioned in reviews as a

potential audience. Two reviewers are the exception here: Canby, who admitted the possibility of an

audience "in-between" "the very young" and "their […] elders"[151] but did not elaborate further, and

Marsha Fottler, who described "the most appreciative audience" for this film as "the eight to 14 age

group." Like Canby, Fottler separated this nameless audience group from the "very young ones," for

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[148] Harmetz, "'Watcher in Woods,' Revised $1 Million Worth, Tries Again."
[149] Skip Sheffield, "Market for 'Watcher' a Mystery," *Boca Raton News*, November 26 1981.
[150] Anon, "Disney's 'Watcher in the Woods' Rescued," *Lakeland Ledger*, November 27 1981.
[151] Canby, "Disney Movie Needs Ghost Writer."

whom the suspense might be too strong, and from adults, whose enjoyment of the film might be weakened by the poor writing and performances.[152]

That Canby's and Fottler's reviews, together with Disney's warning, are isolated references of the pre-teen as a distinct demographic is telling of the lack of cultural significance of this group at the time. Its mention is nevertheless striking, particularly as it happens alongside a general confusion of terms to describe different stages of youth: 11 year-old Kyle Richards is referred to both as "child"[153] (or "innocent little child"[154]) and "adolescent,"[155] while the teenagers, all meant to be around the age of 17, are called "children" by director John Hough[156] and their occultist ceremonies described by reviewers as "a children's game"[157] and "a strange childhood initiation ritual."[158]

What this suggests is an incredible broadness of the concept of childhood, a period apparently interpreted by these critics to comprise minors of all ages without separating teenagers. At the same time, however, the idea of 8-14 as a distinct age group, with a distinct level of maturity and sophistication, even if mentioned by only a few critics, appears to question the validity of childhood as a catch-all term for all stages of pre-adulthood. This challenge was, of course, in its early stages of germination at this point in history. The majority of critics still favoured a child/adult binary audience model, and the few alternative conceptions of an audience of pre-teens were vague and underdeveloped. There was, nevertheless, a sense of impending transformation in American understandings of childhood — Disney's strategies are good evidence of this shift, and their failures even more so. The problem with Disney was addressed by Ed Blank in his review of *The Watcher* for the Pittsburgh Press:

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[152] Marsha Fottler, "'Watcher in the Woods' Provides a Disney Scare," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, December 4 1981.

[153] Terry Hazlett, "'Watcher in Woods:' Tricks Are for Kids," *Observer-Reporter*, February 3 1982.

[154] Hatza, "Don't Be a Watcher of Disney's Barren 'Woods'."

[155] Blank, "Bette Davis Superb; 'Watcher' Average."

[156] Hough, *Film Commentary*.

[157] Sheffield, "Market for 'Watcher' a Mystery."

[158] Hatza, "Don't Be a Watcher of Disney's Barren 'Woods'."

Every scene is staged with an artifice unique to Disney movies. It's phenomenal how every

director who works for the company makes movies that look and feel like every other live-

action adventure or comedy produced by the studio since Walt Disney's death 25 years ago.

How do they do it? And why do they bother? The company has failed with almost every non-

animated release since the early '60s. They can't get the adults or teens they're after, and

children instinctively and rightly turn off to condescension.[159]

Blank's mention of condescension is crucial in its echo of the idea of kids getting older faster, as is his

suggestion of Disney's models being out of touch with the realities of childhood in the 1980s. In an

interview given a few months after the unsuccessful second release of *The Watcher in the Woods*,

Disney producer Tom Wilhite provided an internal admission of the veracity of these claims: "It's

time to start taking risks. […] We have to talk to kids about things that are concerning them in their

real lives."[160] Wilhite acknowledged the "tremendous change in the movie audience in the last ten to

fifteen years," a change he attributed to ideological shifts taking place in America: "People who grew

up in the sixties are now parents and are raising their children with a different point of view."[161]

This different point of view proved challenging for Disney, as its brand was so strongly bonded to a

more traditional and wholesome notion of family and childhood. As one critic sharply wondered,

"can any film with a Disney label attract teen-agers?"[162] They "flocked to see Jaws and Animal

House, not Disney's dim-witted comedies starring Don Knotts and Tim Conway."[163] And yet, the

typical Disney product was still perceived to have a place in American culture of this period: "Parents

at least will be happy to know 'Watcher' has no profanity, no sex and none of the explicit violence

that shocked viewers of Walt Disney's 'Dragonslayer'," assured a reviewer.[164] Moreover, as one

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[159] Blank, "Bette Davis Superb; 'Watcher' Average."
[160] Sally Ogle Davis, "Walt Disney Productions' Falling Star -- Disney Can't Seem to Make Successful Movies Any More," *Lakeland Ledger*, November 28 1980.
[161] Mills, "Disney Looks for a Happy Ending to Its Grim Fairy Tale," 53.
[162] Harmetz, "'Watcher in Woods,' Revised $1 Million Worth, Tries Again."
[163] Grover, *The Disney Touch: Disney, Abc & the Quest for the World's Greatest Media Empire*, 8.
[164] Sheffield, "Market for 'Watcher' a Mystery."

teenager put it, though he "wouldn't be caught dead" in a Disney screening he "looked forward to

the day when he could take his children to see one."[165] In other words, the Disney brand was still

required, only on a smaller scale as it had become relevant to a smaller audience.

According to Wilhite, the studio understood this situation and had defined its goal as "to broaden

the audience, not divorce ourselves from the Disney image."[166] The obstacle was that this decision,

though wise from a financial point of view, was culturally impossible — as efforts like *The Watcher in

the Woods* and others would prove. Even within the company, the impossibility of keeping the

company's brand intact while adapting to changing attitudes in America was recognised: "Sure, I'm a

hypocrite," Ron Miller said in interview. "I let my children see everything — R's, PG's, the lot. But I

have a responsibility to this company. One racy picture could do incredible damage to a name built

up over 55 years."[167] As Miller correctly assessed, it was simply not possible to make the kind of new

pictures the wider audience craved without compromising Disney's reputation as bastion of

childhood innocence. "I would love to have been able to do it, but I couldn't," Miller further

explained. "The people […] who have supported Disney for years, wouldn't stand for it. […] They'll

have to blindfold and gag me before I'll let them do anything more than a soft PG."[168]

Miller's statements reflect an understanding of the market and of the new American reality far

greater than what is popularly attributed to his leadership. Instead of a man with no "guts or vision"

for his job,[169] Miller was the man who paved the way for the rise from the ashes the company would

later see with Michael Eisner. Indeed, although Miller's resistance to change might have sabotaged

Disney's first efforts to branch out, this attitude came from the knowledge that different audiences

required different things, and that Disney was too far associated with one kind of audience to be

excessively adventurous. As is obvious from his executive decisions, Miller was aware that Disney's

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[165] Grover, *The Disney Touch: Disney, Abc & the Quest for the World's Greatest Media Empire*, 11.
[166] Mills, "Disney Looks for a Happy Ending to Its Grim Fairy Tale," 53.
[167] Davis, "Walt Disney Productions' Falling Star -- Disney Can't Seem to Make Successful Movies Any More."
[168] Ibid.
[169] Bosco, "Interview with Harrison Ellenshaw."

eventual success required both innovation and preservation: it was crucial that Disney would remain faithful to the core audience that made it successful; other attempts to seduce different audiences should be made on the side.

Cue in Touchstone Pictures, a new banner created by Ron Miller under which Disney could produce and distribute riskier films, including R-rated fare, without compromising the family-friendly Disney brand. For director John Hough, *The Watcher in the Woods* was "the actual beginning of that process." The director said Disney believed in "a whole new world that it would open up — and it did, because Disney then went on to make all different types of […] films under their different banner [Touchstone] and went off to really hit great successful heights."[170] The creation of Touchstone Pictures, and the solution it offered for this conundrum, is yet another nudge toward the idea of social change during this period. *The Watcher* and other failed attempts by Disney in this period show the cultural impossibility of catering to distinct audiences within the same film — young children, still well-served by the typical Disney film, and teenagers, more inclined to watch adult-oriented features. At the same time, however, these films, and the controversies and failures around them also suggest the beginnings of a new emerging audience — that curious "in-between" group of 8-14 year-olds, sometimes known as pre-teens but still largely unacknowledged.

Conclusion

In spite of its trouble, *The Watcher in the Woods* did not inspire Disney to give up on horror. In 1983, the studio released *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, a Ray Bradbury adaptation and a commercial flop, and two years after that, *The Black Cauldron*, the studio's first PG-rated animated film. Referring to this second title, producer Joe Hale confidently proclaimed that it "should have a broader appeal than any of our animated films for years." He continued: "It's scary enough so that people will be hiding under their seats. Our villain, the Horned King, has all the worst qualities of

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[170] Hough, "Commentary on Alternate Ending 2."

Hitler and Genghis Khan. Most of Disney's animated villains in the past have been fairly comic but this guy is bad through and through."[171] But, much like the Watcher, the Horned King died a painful death at the box office due to narrative inconsistencies and *The Black Cauldron* eventually became known as "the movie that almost killed Disney animation."[172] A later attempt, *Arachnophobia* (Frank Marshall, 1990), described by Disney as a "thrillomedy" also failed, reportedly because the studio "never figured out whether to sell the movie as fun or horror."[173]

Even if they did not bear fruit, these repeated attempts at horror say something about the direction Disney wished to go and about what kind of things it felt would appeal to broader audiences in this period. Indeed, this insistency suggests a change in social perceptions of horror, as the genre went from being taboo in children's films to being perceived as a viable and profitable type of children's and family entertainment. The shift was subtle and slow-building but it was there, persistent enough to eventually thrive, as Disney's own future demonstrated: despite their early frustrated efforts, the studio went to very successfully release *The Nightmare Before Christmas* under the Touchstone banner (see chapter 4), and other PG-rated family horror films (see chapter 5) in the 1990s.

The other subtle shift that took place at this point has to do with children. As *The Watcher in the Woods* demonstrates, there was some confusion around the concept of childhood, particularly in relation to children roughly between the ages of eight to fourteen. This confusion manifested itself linguistically, through the interchangeability of words like child, adolescent and teenager regardless of the subject's age, but also culturally: were all of these non-adults the same audience or did they require different modes of addressing? Was there an appropriate level of intensity and of horror for all youngsters? The production and reception of *The Watcher in the Woods* seems to indicate that here is where the biggest ambiguities lied. If, on the one hand, young children were generally

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[171] Cited in Mills, "Disney Looks for a Happy Ending to Its Grim Fairy Tale," 56.

[172] Dan Kois, "The Black Cauldron -- Is the Movie That Almost Killed Disney Animation Really That Bad?," in *Slate*.

[173] Kim Masters, *The Keys to the Kingdom: How Michael Eisner Lost His Grip* (New York: William Morrow, 2000), 244.

recognised to be a separate group from teenagers and pre-teens, on the other hand there was no clear definition of what a "pre-teen" might be, how it may differ from teenagers or, indeed, if it existed at all.

This unclear situation was reflected also in the difficulty of associating the Disney brand with edgier entertainment, namely horror. While it suggested that there was still a demand for traditional children's and family entertainment, it also demonstrated the strength of the social distinctions made between children and teenagers or adults: the presence of material suitable for older audiences would spoil a child's (or the child's parents') enjoyment of the film, while the attempt to make it accessible for young ones would leave older audiences unsatisfied, resulting in the "too scary for children, too tame for adults" situation criticised in *The Watcher* by so many reviewers. Notably, no middle-ground was suggested in this accusation; children and teenagers or adults were construed as two separate groups with no transitional group in between. The creation of Touchstone Pictures, albeit crucial in resolving many of Disney's problems with making horror and other PG- and R-rated features, did not address the tensions expressed above. Rather, it reinforced the idea of children as entirely separate audiences from adults, so distinct that an entirely new banner was required in order to successfully branch out Disney's product.

These two points of tension are, I argue, two sides of the same coin: the horror genre began to gain favour as child-appropriate entertainment in the early 1980s because of changing attitudes towards children and childhood, particularly to do with new perceptions of developmental stages and social groups. If "children" changed meaning, then the idea of horror as being unsuitable for children was also questionable, leaving the way open for experimentation. Meanwhile, as a still-vague idea of the pre-teen took shape in America's mind, the horror genre struggled to adapt and exit a long period of images, motifs and themes hostile to children.

The Watcher in the Woods marks the very beginning of this process; the hesitation, tension and struggle of its history are the inception of the children's horror trend. Its strangeness to the modern

viewer, so acute it crystallised the film as cult object, is a symptom of its time-specific circumstances and concerns, long-resolved — at least partially — in the present day. The next chapter will focus on the second milestone in the development of the children's horror trend which, much like Disney's early attempts at horror, often sees its historical and cultural importance downplayed; it is the introduction of PG-13 to the American rating system in 1984.

Chapter Two

Setting new boundaries: *Gremlins* and the introduction of PG-13

In chapter one, I addressed Disney's decision to start producing PG-rated films, breaking away from their previous standard of exclusively G-rated product. This move was, I argued, a response to cultural and social changes which affected the wants and needs of film audiences; but although Disney changed its studio strategy, it still operated within the confinements of a broader cultural arrangement: the film rating system, established in 1968 by the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA). Apart from some minor tweaks, this system and its classifications had remained consistent throughout its history — until 1984, when a string of controversial features led to the creation of PG-13 ("Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13"). This new classification was intended to bridge the gap between PG and the restricted R classification. If the rating system is intended to "reflect the current sentiment of parents" and "mirror contemporary concern,"[174] can this amend suggest important changes in society, particularly in relation to views of horror and childhood?

Regrettably, the importance of PG-13 has been systematically downplayed, often even ignored, in the academic context. In Stephen Vaughn's critical account of the rating system's history, for instance, the author frames the introduction of PG-13 around several cases of rating controversies of the early 1980s, most of which surprisingly refer not to PG or PG-13 films but to the R and X classifications and their "clearly flawed appeals process."[175] The importance of the restricted side of the ratings spectrum is so overpowering that the author concludes his analysis of PG-13 with a

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[174] The Classification and Rating Administration, "Why: History of Ratings," in *Film Ratings.*
[175] Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*, 109.

caveat, "there was still nothing to categorize the area between R and X."[176] Vaughn did, however, subtly hint at why PG-13 may be important on its own: the violence and horror in Spielberg's family films such as *Poltergeist* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, which were awarded the PG rating with minor struggle, were key to creating PG-13[177] and prompted debates around the distinction "between teenagers and preteens."[178]

This is a point worthy of much deeper consideration, particularly given the heated controversy generated by *Temple of Doom* upon release. Its violence and gore surprised viewers and upset parents, prompting Paramount to insert a warning in its advertisements for the film ("This film may be too intense for younger children") and Spielberg to clarify he would not let a 10-year-old see one of the film's most violent sequences.[179] But if *Temple of Doom* was "the last straw [...] that broke the back of support for the single PG rating,"[180] its critical reception was, like that of *Poltergeist*, mostly positive. The issues around PG-13 become more complex when a third family-friendly film, *Gremlins*, is introduced to the group of PG-13 instigators. Unlike its predecessors, *Gremlins*, provoked strong critical ambiguity and an eruption of anxieties not only over the film's violence but also its tone and ideology, seen to be closer to horror than a family film. That PG-13 would then be perceived to appear as "a sop to the pressure, not as an initiative"[181] suggests the early to mid-1980s as a period of transformation in social and cultural perceptions, in which PG-13 surfaces as the marker of new boundaries for childhood as well as the horror genre.

Debates about the film rating system have mainly been preoccupied with the topics of censorship and child protection, usually discussed separately. Discussions over censorship tend to limit themselves to the restricted end of the ratings spectrum and detail the problems surrounding the X

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[176] Ibid., 120.
[177] Ibid., 114-15.
[178] Ibid., 117.
[179] Aljean Harmetz, "'Indiana Jones' May Spell Doom for Current Movie Rating System," *The Palm Beach Post*, May 23 1984.
[180] Ellen Goodman, "Change the Films, Not the Ratings," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26 1984.
[181] Charles Champlin, "Pg-13: A Cynical Industry's Panacea?," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, July 14 1984.

and NC-17 ratings,[182] while authors who focus on child protection largely discuss the system's scope

and the competence of its classifications, sometimes defending a change from age-based ratings to

detailed content descriptions.[183] Although the debates differ, the concerns raised on each side often

meet, specifically in the questioning of the system's integrity and the MPAA's right to moral

authority, as well as the consequences of the power it wields in Hollywood.[184] Another point of

contact between the two strands is the absence of criticism of the R rating. The restriction enforced

by this classification — no children under 17 allowed without an adult guardian — is not only

tolerated but apparently also demanded. Indeed, the debates in both of the strands outlined above

can be traced back to one root problem: the dilution of the boundary set by the R rating.

This dilution happens in two ways. On the restricted side of the R, the existence of another frontier,

the X or NC-17 rating, "is turning us all into children"[185] by limiting the distribution of those films and,

therefore, restricting content to adults. On the unrestricted side, the existence of PG-13 has exposed

children to some adult content that was previously controlled, thus challenging the meaning and

purpose of the R rating and opening the door to concerns over child protection. In other words, the

R rating establishes an accepted distinction between children and adults and the content that is

suitable for them, and this separation cannot be challenged (through changes either below or above

the line) without tension and struggle.

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[182] See, Lewis, *Hollywood V. Hard Core: How the Struggle over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry*; Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*.

[183] See Bushman and Cantor, "Media Ratings for Violence and Sex: Implications for Policymakers and Parents."; Joanne Cantor, *Mommy, I'm Scared: How Tv and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them* (San Diego, California: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1998); David A. Walsh, "A Validity Test of Movie, Television, and Video-Game Ratings," *Pediatrics* 107, no. 6 (2001); David A. Gentile, "Media Ratings for Movies, Music, Video Games, and Television: A Review of the Research and Recommendations for Improvements," *Adolescent Medicine Clinics* (2005).

[184] See Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). and Kirby Dick, "This Film Is Not yet Rated," (2006).

[185] "This Film Is Not yet Rated."

The cultural weight of this distinction has also been demonstrated recently by a growing preoccupation with the "ratings creep."[186] The "creep" refers to the gradual ways in which the R and PG-13 classifications have supposedly become more lenient and allowed more frequent and more intense adult content to become unrestricted. Supporters of this hypothesis sometimes refer to R films which, supposedly, would have been rated X or NC-17 in the past, but their greater focus is on PG-13, since it is the most successful at the box office as well as the highest unrestricted rating (and consequently, the most attractive to young viewers). The conclusions of "ratings creep" analyses are similar for all authors: the PG-13 rating has increasingly allowed more adult content to be passed without restriction, particularly violent images, therefore films rated PG-13 are not appropriate for the under-thirteen demographic.

While these analyses appear to be correct in their finding that adult content has been increasingly allowed in PG-13 films (as well as in other ratings), the "ratings creep" hypothesis is only valid if we are to believe that each classification has, or should have, a definitive and static definition. But, as the MPAA's detractors often point out, the rating system has never had any concise criteria for its classifications; instead, the ratings are bound to external factors like society, culture, economy and the industry.[187] The close link between social attitudes and the ratings is no mystery even to supporters of the "ratings creep" hypothesis, although these authors frame it as an exception rather than the rule. To explain the decline of comedy scenes involving alcohol abuse in unrestricted films, for instance, Leone and Barowski propose that "filmmakers, studios, and the MPAA have become more sensitized to [its] dire consequences."[188] Furthermore, the conclusion that PG-13 is not suitable for children depends on personal definitions of childhood and expectations of what is and is

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[186] Bushman and Cantor, "Media Ratings for Violence and Sex: Implications for Policymakers and Parents." Kimberley M. Thompson and Fumie Yokota, "Violence, Sex, and Profanity in Films: Correlation of Movie Ratings with Content," *Medscape General Medicine* (2004). Ron Leone and Nicole Houle, "21st Century Ratings Creep: Pg-13 and R," *Communication Research Reports* 23, no. 1 (2006). Ron Leone and Laurie Barowski, "Mpaa Ratings Creep: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Pg-13 Rating Categories in Us Movies," *Journal of Children and Media* 5, no. 1 (2011).

[187] Dick, "This Film Is Not yet Rated."

[188] Leone and Barowski, "Mpaa Ratings Creep: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Pg-13 Rating Categories in Us Movies," 25.

not appropriate for children. In fact, despite persistent criticism, the rating system still appears to be well-liked by parents,[189] suggesting continued harmony between its classifications and the predominant values in America at a given time.

What interests me here is not the validity of the "ratings creep" hypothesis but the way it repeats the concerns expressed about PG-13 when the rating was first introduced, echoing a fear sometimes bordering on moral panic over the kind of entertainment available for children, as illustrated by accusations that "[PG-13 is] the Trojan horse in the movie-rating system — allowing wildly unsuitable material to smuggle its way past walls erected by even the most protective parents."[190] These preoccupations reveal a concern with notions of suitability and the boundaries of childhood, not only in relation to adulthood but also within childhood itself: as I will argue, PG-13 points to an alteration of the structure of childhood in western society in its distinction between early childhood (before the age of thirteen) and late childhood (adolescence). This segmentation may be culturally as important as the one between children and adults, as suggested by Medved's call for the substitution of PG-13 with R-13, a classification restricted for children under the age of thirteen.

In this chapter I will turn to the critical reception and promotional campaigns of *Poltergeist*, *Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins* for evidence of tension surrounding changing social attitudes and expectations in the period leading up to the introduction of PG-13. What I propose is that the rating controversies around these three films reveal a progressive intensification of struggles around the family and childhood, articulated through the horror genre, that culminate in the creation of PG-13. This classification therefore emerges as symbol of a new social and cultural agreement over a more segmented definition of childhood, as well as an indicator of changing views on horror, and, moreover, a landmark in the history of the film industry.

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[189] The Classification and Rating Administration, "Do You Know the System?," *Film Ratings* (2012).
[190] Michael Medved, "New Films Show Pg-13 Is Hollywood's Trojan Horse," in *Jewish World Review* (2001).

Horror, violence and family values: *Poltergeist*; *Temple of Doom*

Poltergeist and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* are the two earlier films usually named as instigators of the PG-13 rating. Although they tend to be critically and popularly framed as highly controversial films, I propose that the debates around them were in fact tempered by the films' image as family-friendly, raising questions not about suitability in general but specifically in relation to small children, thus suggesting impending segmentation of the concept of childhood.

Poltergeist caused trouble before its release. The film's innovative use of sound intensified scary moments beyond what the Classification & Ratings Administration (CARA) committee felt was appropriate for young children. *Poltergeist* thus received an R classification — for terror —, which was quickly and successfully appealed for a PG on the grounds of the film being family-friendly.[191] Free from restrictions, *Poltergeist* went on to become a box office triumph, now remembered as a classic. These events are noted by classification scholars like Vaughn and remembered by fans of film trivia but do not seem to have been perceived as major controversial points by critics of the period. In fact, reviewers of the film barely demonstrated concern over misclassification, biased appeals processes or the film's potential effects on young audiences. The review in *Variety*, for example, leaves out all comments on the audience to focus on critiques of the "truly stupid" story[192] and popular critic Roger Ebert described it as "the [horror] movie 'The Amityville Horror' dreamed of being,"[193] without ever questioning its suitability for young audiences or its place under the PG umbrella.

This lack of public outrage is significant when paired with another trend in critical opinion of the period, the absolute acceptance of *Poltergeist*'s affiliation with the horror genre. This does not mean, however, that this film was received as a mundane entry in horror film. As Kim Newman clarified, *Poltergeist* was "the horror equivalent of the exuberant, harmless, greatest show on Earth

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[191] Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*, 114.
[192] "Review: 'Poltergeist'," *Variety* (1981).
[193] Roger Ebert, "Poltergeist," *RogerEbert.com* (1982).

genre blockbusters (Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Ark, E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial)."[194] The warmth of

Poltergeist's horror was noted by other critics too. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* described it

as benevolent and "much closer in spirit and sensibility" to Spielberg's work, which has "preserved

the wonderment of childhood," than to Tobe Hooper's R-rated *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974).[195]

Thus *Poltergeist* was read both as undeniably horror and undeniably benign, a paradox explained

only by the film's ideological roots, much closer to the family film than to the horror genre. Take, for

example, the critical responses to Carol Ann, the missing child: played by "cute little Heather

O'Rourke,"[196] Carol Ann is "an open-faced, long-haired, innocent little cherub;"[197] a "small, blond

beauty;" an "innocent hostage."[198] These word choices embody in Carol Ann an idealized picture of

childhood, and her mystique is so powerful it obliterates the other child character, Robbie, who is

never mentioned by critics or exalted in the film. To be sure, if Carol Ann is other-worldly in her

innocence, Robbie is firmly grounded on his passions and fears: his *Star Wars* memorabilia and

childish fear of storms and clowns. Though these attributes make Robbie a more accurate portrait of

a real child, it is Carol Ann who drives the film and entrances its audience — as the fictional family

searches for their missing daughter, so does America pursue the lost childhood ideal. This utopia is

entwined with a similar model of the family. Though it is far from perfect (as the parents' drug use

suggests), the family's roots are sound by traditional conservative American standards: the father is

a hard-working Reagan admirer and the mother has raised her children according to traditional

Christian values. Indeed, *Poltergeist* evokes family values throughout, and references childhood

favorites and classics, as noted by Kim Newman:

> *Poltergeist's supernatural complainants are […] childish: a cyclone and a grumpy tree from*
>
> *The Wizard of Oz, and a fantasy land beyond the bedroom closet from The Lion, The Witch*

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[194] Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, 231.
[195] Vincent Canby, "Poltergeist (1982)," *The New York Times* (1982).
[196] Anon, "Review: 'Poltergeist'," in *Variety* (1981).
[197] Ebert, "Poltergeist".
[198] Canby, "Poltergeist (1982)".

and the Wardrobe. Poltergeist may well be the only successful, non-spoof horror film in which nobody gets killed.[199]

Thus *Poltergeist* takes shape as a family-friendly and ideologically conservative horror film that, outside of its initial ratings appeal process, did not cause controversy or social indignation. This does not exclude *Poltergeist* from discussions on the creation of PG-13 but an angle other than moral panics or industrial bias must be taken. As Newman suggested, *Poltergeist* was an anomaly within the horror genre. Its existence, as well as its success, reveals an emerging cultural interest in non-parody family-driven horror entertainment, later embodied in the children's horror trend discussed in this thesis. At this point in time, however, the idea was only a seed, not yet fully developed and therefore not yet in confrontation with the ratings system or the dominant social attitudes about children and horror.

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom was the next family film to cause ratings controversy. The debates are well-known and the film's use of violence has been credited as "instrumental in motivating the Motion Pictures Association of America to institute the PG-13 rating."[200] But, as in the case of *Poltergeist*, critics were only partially conflicted about *Temple of Doom*'s contents and its suitability for children. Roger Ebert, for example, wrote a positive review without a single mention of the film's violence and surrounding controversy. Similarly, the main point of contention for Todd McCarthy of *Variety* was the move "away from nifty stories in favor of one big effect after another," only briefly addressing violence and children. On that topic, McCarthy wrote:

> *Kids 10-12 upwards will eat it all up, of course, but many of the images, particularly those involving a gruesome feast of live snakes, fried beetles, eyeball soup and monkey brains, and those in the sacrificial ceremony, might prove extraordinarily frightening to younger children*

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[199] Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, 231.
[200] Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 103.

> *who, indeed, are being catered to in this film by the presence of the adorable 12-year-old Ke*
>
> *Huy Quan.*[201]

Although this paragraph suggests a mild concern over the film's address to young audiences, McCarthy's choice to not develop these ideas any further is illustrative of the relative importance he gave them. On the other hand, McCarthy hints at *Temple of Doom*'s specific demographic appeal ("kids 10-12 upwards"), a thought mirrored by other critics such as Pauline Kael — "there are sequences that are like what children dream up when they're having a gross-out and trying to top each other"[202] — and Vincent Canby:

> *If you've ever been a child or, barring that, if you've ever been around children, ages 7 to*
>
> *about 11, you may remember the sort of game in which each child attempts to come up with*
>
> *the vilest, most disgusting, most repulsive, most stomach-turning meal he can think of. […]*
>
> *The children squeal with delighted horror as each new dish is described, finding it all delicious*
>
> *fun, though any adults in the vicinity will probably feel sick.*

The idea of a conflict between children and adults' reactions to the same scenes resurfaces later in Canby's piece, in relation to one of the film's most debated scenes: "a maharajah's banquet where the menu features the kind of dishes (live baby snakes, chilled monkey brains) that children will find simultaneously revolting and hilarious while the rest of us reach for our Tums." This adult repulsion at children finding delight in violence is expressed also in one of Canby's opening lines: "[feeling sick] may well be the public's reaction to Steven Spielberg's exuberantly tasteless and entertaining 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,' which […] already is causing a ruckus because of its PG rating."[203] The "ruckus" is thus attributed to *Temple of Doom*'s lack of edifying content, content which panders to children's revolting dreams instead of regulating them with good morals, as traditional PG-rated children's and family films are thought to do.

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[201] Todd McCarthy, "Review: 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom'," *Variety* (1984).

[202] Pauline Kael, *State of the Art: Film Writings 1983-1985* (London: Marion Boyars, 2009), 178.

[203] Vincent Canby, "Screen: 'Indiana Jones,' Directed by Spielberg," *The New York Times* (1984).

If *Poltergeist* can be thought of as the seedling for the concept of family-oriented horror, *Temple of Doom* is the equivalent embryo for the acceptance of more violence in children's and family entertainment. Unlike *Poltergeist*, however, *Temple of Doom* generated much tension and anxiety. This is illustrated not only by the comments quoted above but, most especially, by the ambiguity which surrounded them. Vincent Canby's review for *The New York Times* provides a good illustration. Despite his criticisms and his warnings for parents ("contains a lot of explicit violence"), the critic's reprimands are only superficial. Indeed, Canby's descriptions of the film's violence are often framed positively, in a shy defense of the film's violent pleasures. Note the passage below:

> *There's no doubt about it — the movie, in addition to being endearingly disgusting, is violent in ways that may scare the wits out of some small patrons. The kidnapped Indian children, when finally found, are seen being flogged as they slave away deep in the maharajah's mines, though the flogging is so exaggerated that it seems less real than cartoon-like.*
>
> *There's a vivid sequence in which a man, being offered to Kali, is slowly lowered into a fiery pit, but not before a priest has removed the victim's heart with his bare fingers. This, however, is not only a film-making trick but a trick within the film itself, something that older children may understand more readily than their adult guardians. Nevertheless, it's something to give parents pause.[204]*

Even if Canby was aware of the concerns of American parents and positioned himself with them — "the rest of us" — his tone and choice of words suggest that his disapproval of *Temple of Doom* might be guided by social expectation. Canby's reticence, as with the rest of critical reception, establishes a sense of escalating tension from the release of *Poltergeist* to that of *Temple of Doom*. These films were pioneers of challenging ideas — family-oriented horror and violence in children's entertainment — and the controversy they generated around suitability for some but not all children had wider implications: had the PG rating become redundant or ineffective for early-1980s America?

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[204] Ibid.

<u>Ratings and the boundaries of childhood</u>

The PG rating is the common denominator to controversies around both *Poltergeist* and *Temple of Doom*. In the first case, PG was initially deemed inappropriate by CARA but later accepted by the public; in the second, PG was attributed by CARA and then contested by the public. I will now propose that the motives for these debates were rooted not in anxieties over the film's content as much as in struggles over social changes, namely in the concept of childhood itself. Vincent Canby's review of *Poltergeist* provides the first piece of evidence in this direction. The critic wrote:

> [*Poltergeist is*] *a marvelously spooky ghost story that may possibly scare the wits out of very small children and offend those parents who believe that kids should be protected from their own, sometimes savage imaginations.*

> *I suspect, however, that there's a vast audience of teen-agers and others who'll love this film. Indeed, Poltergeist often sounds as if it had been dictated by an exuberant twelve-year-old.*[205]

These paragraphs suggest two things. First, the differences between children and adults' reactions to the same material and its potential for moral offense, specifically to do with the perceived need to protect children and control their thoughts. Second, an emergent distinction between "very small children" and "teen-agers and others," a group personified in the "exuberant twelve-year-old." The first point is related to on-going moral panics about youth; the second to the rating system's latent problem in the early 1980s.

These are also topics that Canby addressed again, more extensively and more ambiguously, in his review of *Temple of Doom*. As quoted in the previous section, Canby again suggested that parental concerns on the matter of film violence may not match children's own reactions and attitudes — or, at the very least, not be an adequate reflection of children as a uniform demographic. As he had

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[205] "Poltergeist (1982)".

done for *Poltergeist*, Canby distinguished between the different kinds of child audiences who may and may not appreciate *Temple of Doom*: where the film has strong affinity with the play of children aged seven to eleven, it may also frighten "some small patrons." This division between young children and children around the age of eleven is also suggested in *Variety*'s prediction that "kids 10-12 will eat it all up." In both of these reviews, the concerns over the film's violence are categorically deflected from a particular demographic — older children between the ages of seven and twelve —, who both reviewers agree would enjoy the film greatly. Their concerns are instead aimed at the age group directly below: the small patrons, the "younger children."

The recurrent quality of this distinction is important, as it demands clarification of the usual claims that PG-13 was "a direct response to charges that the MPAA was soft on violence."[206] Indeed, the critical reception of *Poltergeist* and *Temple of Doom* points to a different problem: the PG rating was no longer able to signal suitability for both "very small children" and "kids 10-12." This conundrum may be what was behind the ambiguous feelings of Canby and other reviewers toward *Temple of Doom*, a film that could not be recommended for all children but could also not be repudiated for all children uniformly — the rating system's scope, in particular its PG classification, no longer matched a notion of childhood most parents in America could agree on. This emerging idea of childhood as a segmented period was precisely how Steven Spielberg framed PG-13 when he first suggested the rating's creation to the president of the MPAA:

> *I remember calling Jack Valenti and suggesting to him that we need a rating between R and PG, because so many films were falling into a netherworld, you know, of unfairness. Unfair that certain kids were exposed to Jaws, but also unfair that certain films were restricted, that kids who were 13, 14, 15 should be allowed to see.*[207]

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[206] Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989*, 367.
[207] Jim Windolf, "Q&A: Steven Spielberg," *Vanity Fair* (2008).

Like some of the critics quoted above, Spielberg set a clear distinction between early childhood and late childhood, or adolescence, defending that different levels of violence and intensity could be appropriate for each group, while still respecting the frontier set by the R classification. There appears to have been consensus about the existence of this division, even if the exact moment of transition was debatable, varying from as young as seven to thirteen years old. Therefore, the anxiety, struggle and controversy can be traced back to a gradually intensified clash between social attitudes and social structures, affecting the rating system. PG-13 responded to these problems in a simple, yet majorly impactful way: it established a tangible middle-ground, an "official" separation between entertainment suitable for all children and features suitable only for older children and teenagers.

Horror, violence and the desecration of America: *Gremlins*

These issues are complicated further by the debates around the last film in the PG-13 trinity, *Gremlins*. While the reception of *Poltergeist* and *Temple of Doom* was heavy with anxiety over the segmentation of childhood and the inadequacy of the PG rating, these issues surfaced only rarely in relation to *Gremlins*, overshadowed by more serious moral concerns about the film's violence. The shift in tone is illustrated by Vincent Canby's review. Similarly to *Temple of Doom*, Canby concluded his review of *Gremlins* with a warning about it not being "ideal entertainment for younger children" despite its PG rating; unlike he had done for *Temple of Doom*, however, the critic did not excuse the violence in *Gremlins* as child's play. On the contrary, *Gremlins* is "seriously mean" and "[attacks its] young audience as mercilessly as the creatures attack the characters." Canby wrote:

> *I've no idea how children will react to the sight of a Kingston Falls mom, carving knife in hand, decapitating one gremlin and shoving another into the food processor, head first. Will they laugh when Billy Peltzer, the film's idealized, intentionally dopey, 20-year-old hero, is threatened by a gremlin with a chainsaw and then stabbed by a gremlin with a spear gun?*

> *Will they cheer when Billy blows up the Kingston Falls movie theater, where the gremlins,*
>
> *now resembling an average kiddie matinee crowd, are exuberantly responding to ''Snow*
>
> *White and the Seven Dwarfs?*[208]

These concerns were voiced by other critics. Roger Ebert, for whom the gremlins "turn into truly hateful creatures," wrote: *"And the movie itself turns nasty, especially in a scene involving a monster that gets slammed in a microwave oven […]. I had a queasy feeling that before long we'd be reading newspaper stories about kids who went home and tried the same thing with the family cat."*[209] In a similar vein, another critic wondered if the death scenes should be presented as funny in a children's film, remarking that he would "hate to be a cat or rabbit this Christmas."[210] This kind of preoccupation with the film's potentially nefarious effects on children was widespread but, curiously, the reason for its predominance seems to have been less the violence itself but rather the ideological context in which it was shown.

Both *Poltergeist* and *Temple of Doom* explore ideas of childhood innocence, the value of the family and the family as a powerful unit. This is especially clear in *Temple of Doom*, as it is only by uniting as a family that Indiana Jones, Willie and Short Round reach (literal) salvation: Indiana Jones rescues Short Round from death as an abandoned child by "adopting" him; Short Round exorcises Indiana's possession curse by declaring his filial love; and together they save Willie from the fires of hell, a Biblical punishment for the sins of pride, adultery and avarice to which she was prey. The film sanctified the family — in a moment reminiscent of the lepers' song in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973), the natives kneel before Indiana's holy family —, and showed the demonic consequences of the destruction of this unit: morally corrupted or physically abused children, as well as tyranny and social misery.

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[208] Vincent Canby, "Screen: 'Gremlins,' Kiddie Gore," *The New York Times* (1984).
[209] Roger Ebert, "Gremlins," *RogerEbert.com* (1984).
[210] Anon, "Gremlins! Will You Let Your Children See Them?," *Daily Express*, October 2 1984.

This family ideal is an intrinsic part of American identity. As Ronald Reagan famously said, lesson

number one about America is that all great change begins at the dinner table.[211] For this president,

the family was "the basic unit of religious and moral values that hold our society together,"[212] and he

encouraged Americans to teach family values to their children and "to have the courage to defend

those values and virtues and the willingness to sacrifice for them."[213] It is no surprise then that films

that affirmed these values could be more easily accepted than films that did not, irrespective of

violent content.

And, indeed, two ideas recur in reviews of *Gremlins* which may explain its mixed reception. The first

is America, specifically "movie-made America, a dream of snow and Christmas and little dogs and

angry ladies and nice neighbors."[214] The second is its destruction: "Capraesque Smalltown, U.S.A., [is

subjected] to a devastation that makes the original 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers' look benign."[215]

Moreover, a "*Gremlins* vs. America" theme was frequently noted by critics: "On the one hand, you

have an idyllic American small town, with Burger Kings and Sears stores clustered merrily around the

village square, and on the other hand you have a plague of reprehensible little beasties."[216] Ebert

restated this confrontation in conversation with Gene Siskel, describing *Gremlins* as "haunting the

whole tradition of Norman Rockwell's Christmas, American Hollywood movie."[217] Or, in Pauline

Kael's words, it "defiles [a] vision of the good American life;" it defiles "Frank Capraland."[218]

This opposition between *Gremlins* and American values is made especially problematic when the

gremlins are compared to children. "The gremlins could be children who learn everything from TV,

rock 'n' roll and B movies – and make the worst of it;"[219] they are "children as seen by those who

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[211] Ronald Reagan, "Reagan's Farewell Speech," *PBS.org* (1988).
[212] "Radio Address to the Nation on Domestic Social Issues," *The American Presidency Project* (1983).
[213] "Acceptance of the Republican Nomination for President," *PBS.org* (1980).
[214] Michael Wood, "Little Devils," *New Society*, December 13 1984.
[215] Canby, "Screen: 'Gremlins,' Kiddie Gore".
[216] Ebert, "Gremlins".
[217] Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, "Gremlins," in *At the Movies* (Buena Vista Television, 1984).
[218] Kael, *State of the Art: Film Writings 1983-1985*, 188.
[219] Richard Corliss, "Eek! Aaarrrgh! It's Et with Teeth," *Time Magazine*, July 2 1984.

don't like them. Little devils, we say."[220] If the gremlins can be perceived as symbols for children, the conflict between this film and "the good American life" is intensified. Unlike *Poltergeist* and *Temple of Doom*, *Gremlins* does not sanctify family values but hops between praising and deconstructing them, starting with the notion of childhood innocence, a cornerstone of the other two films.

As well as questioning the notion of childhood innocence, through its depiction of the creatures, *Gremlins* also puts the nuclear family to the test in a series of challenges. First, it reduces the supposed patriarch, Mr. Peltzer, to a comic relief character, supported by his more successful son, Billy. Second, it establishes a second family unit through Billy's romantic pairing with Kate, only to leave the viewer wondering whether they "are meant to be a charming pair or a spoof of dopey wholesomeness."[221] Moreover, as Billy upstages his father so too he is surpassed by his "child," Gizmo, who is in turn overpowered (if temporarily) by the gremlins — thus establishing a chain of fathers made redundant by their progressively less innocent children. The end result of this continuum of destroyed families is comically illustrated by Mr. Futterman, Billy's neighbor who possesses unshakeable faith in the American way — it "can take anything!" Anything, that is, except gremlins, who later in the film take the wheel of Mr. Futterman's American-made plough and run it over its enthusiastic owner, his wife and their Christmas-decorated home.

The message of *Gremlins*, as summarized by a critic, is thus: "too many gizmos are rupturing the nuclear family; our children are out of control; Christmas kills."[222] The disparity between *Gremlins*' perspective and other family films, particularly those by Spielberg, was often noted. It was seen as a "black humorist's parody" of *E.T.*,[223] and possessing "a very different character" to *Poltergeist*.[224] Its ideology set it apart from the traditional family film, and its irreverence, although sometimes noted

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[220] Wood, "Little Devils."

[221] Kael, *State of the Art: Film Writings 1983-1985*, 189.

[222] David Edelstein, *Voice*, July 24 1984.

[223] Kael, *State of the Art: Film Writings 1983-1985*, 188.

[224] Canby, "Screen: 'Gremlins,' Kiddie Gore".

as a source of enjoyment, was also noted as improper — "I liked it too. Maybe I have a sick sense of humor"[225]— and frequently condemned:

> [Gremlins] *is a black adult joke at the expense of innocence, all the more disturbing because children have been lured to it in America by its 'Parental Guidance' rating, though the kids with me in the cinema sat with the stiff, contorted limbs of coma victims as the movie turned from being a homely comedy into a house-of-horrors nightmare.*[226]

Here, Alexander Walker clearly indicated that what made *Gremlins* so deeply problematic was the breach of the frontier set by the R rating and the unwelcome intrusion of horror in the realm of "homely comedies," the PG rating. The situation is framed around concerns of effects but its reach is much broader: "*Gremlins* snatches the security blanket away from everything that has been held holy in children's movies – home, family, Christmas, religion and even the beloved memory of Walt Disney."[227] In other words, the combination of family and horror in *Gremlins* goes against the strongly established cultural zeal for the preservation of childhood innocence and its symbols.[228]

What the example of *Gremlins* demonstrates is that there was a second layer of anxiety concerning the PG rating at this point in time, associated not just with changing notions of childhood but also with changing notions of the horror genre. To go back to my analogy of the three films as a ramp, *Gremlins* is the extrapolation of the changes explored by *Poltergeist* and *Temple of Doom*. In other words, if *Poltergeist* introduced the idea of horror for a family audience and *Temple of Doom* introduced the notion of acceptable levels of violence in children's entertainment, *Gremlins* put the two together in a family-oriented horror film that has the themes and violence of a horror film *as well as* the kind of ideology associated with the genre. The implications were vast — for the rating system and American understandings of childhood, as I have already suggested in the previous

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[225] Ebert, "Gremlins."
[226] Alexander Walker, *Evening Standard*, July 12 1984.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader*.

sections, but also for the horror genre, which had previously been thought of as restricted and incompatible with children.

Ratings and the boundaries of horror

The issue which dominates the critical reception of *Gremlins* is precisely that of genre miscegenation and the viability of horror for a child audience. By and large, the focus was on the impossibility of such a combination. As quoted in the last section, Alexander Walker attributed the family-horror blend to malice but others wrote about it differently, mostly using images of internal conflict: Pauline Kael described Dante's tone as "(perhaps deliberately) uncertain;"[229] while Vincent Canby wrote about the "schizoid" personality of this "wiseacre mixture of […] movie genres and movie sensibilities."[230] The split between genres and sensibilities was often personified, in what Kim Newman called "a struggle between the world views of Spielberg and Dante"[231] and David Edelstein summed up as "Dante shitting all over Spielberg's never-never land, and Spielberg sugaring that excrement."[232]

This opposition between Spielberg and Dante's visions for the film was entirely fabricated. No tension between the two was ever reported and the two filmmakers seemed to be in agreement about the film's direction — not a battle of genres but a marriage.[233] To be sure, the real opposition the critics allude to may be less between Dante and Spielberg than about what they represent, i.e. Dante for horror, the R rating and anarchic ideology; Spielberg for the family film, the PG rating and traditional family values. The critical insistence on this fictional antagonism is significant in its suggestion of the family/ horror combination as culturally anathema, a union so challenging it could only exist in the context of an artificial polarization between filmmakers.

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[229] Kael, *State of the Art: Film Writings 1983-1985*, 189.
[230] Canby, "Screen: 'Gremlins,' Kiddie Gore".
[231] Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, 185.
[232] Edelstein.
[233] James White, "The Story Behind Gremlins," *Total Film* (2009).

This suggestion gains strength when we consider the disparities between the film's narrative and its promotional campaigns. From the way Spielberg and Dante handled the original script, we can deduce an intention to blend the genres of horror and family as seamlessly as possible, with cuts, edits and plot changes made specifically to reduce the film's intensity but without altering its horror elements. For example, in one of the few death scenes that survived the filmmakers' changes, the script called for the science teacher to be stabbed in the face with several needles — with a touch of humor, this was changed to a single needle on the buttocks.[234]

The most impactful change, however, was the inclusion of Gizmo. In the original script, Gizmo appeared only in the first scenes and quickly turned into the leader of the gremlin pack. Spielberg wanted to keep Gizmo an ally all the way and so Stripe was introduced as the new villain, a change Joe Dante credits with making the film "much more accessible."[235] The added accessibility may come from a distancing from the horror genre: in the original script, Gizmo's transformation into a gremlin put him in direct conflict with his father figure, Billy, who ultimately destroys him — a plotline strikingly similar to horror narratives featuring the Terrible Child motif such as *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, 1960), *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) and others, which often climax in infanticide. The persistency of Gizmo as a cuddly pet, on the other hand, brings *Gremlins* closer to family narratives like *E.T.*.

Despite these attempts to find a middle-ground, not much of the horror side of the film seems to have travelled outside the text. "I think people were upset," Joe Dante has said in interview, "[to have taken] a 4-year-old to see 'Gremlins,' thinking it's going to be a cuddly, funny animal movie and then seeing that it turns into a horror picture."[236] Indeed, although the filmmakers attempted a balance between horror and family entertainment, the marketing — much like the critics quoted earlier — insisted on a separation between the two. In contrast with those critics, however, the

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[234] Ibid.
[235] David Chute, *Film Comment*, May-June 1984.
[236] Anthony Breznican, "Pg-13 Remade Hollywood Ratings System," *Seattle Pi* (2004).

marketing of *Gremlins* did not present this separation as a conflict. Quite simply, it disregarded the horror elements in *Gremlins* and presented it according to the regular expectations of a PG-rated family film. The trailers and television adverts, for example, heavily emphasized the film's connection to Spielberg, imitating "the color and style of the 'E.T.' ads,"[237] and opening with the words "Steven Spielberg presents." The editing of these spots also sought to remind audiences of Spielberg's work, highlighting the comedy, romance and adventure aspects of the film, as well as Gizmo's cute appeal. In contrast, Joe Dante was only mentioned briefly at the end, while the scenes of horror with the gremlins were omitted or framed in humor.

The same strategy was used in the merchandise, which was dominated by Gizmo. He featured on the box of *Gremlins* breakfast cereal, jigsaw puzzles, stationary, apparel, stickers and transfers; and was sold as stuffed animal, action figure, singing doll, in wind-up cars, as well as in an array of bendable figurines, water hatchers and other assorted toys. Fast food chain Hardee's sold five *Gremlins* story books and records that, despite being direct adaptations of the film's story and not tie-in fictions, were described in the television advert as "stories about Gizmo and his friends." Further testament to the mogwai's lasting popularity was the Gizmo version of Furby, an interactive electronic pet, released in 1999 by Tiger Electronics — as well as the number of other pets named after him, both real and fictional, such as the family dog in *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994).

But this Gizmomania was selective: the mogwai was restricted to gentle and cheerful representations. This is in direct contrast with the film, where Gizmo spends most of his time weeping, screaming and trembling in distress. Far from being the singing, cooing sweet little creature the merchandise implied him to be, film-Gizmo is constantly found in situations of extreme danger — like being pinned to a darts board —, in a state of overwhelming anxiety — caused by the "bright light!" and the concerning development of the other creatures —, or in the process of killing one of his kind, Stripe.

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[237] Ibid.

Images of the other gremlins underwent a similar process of selection. Pauline Kael found it apt to describe them as "aggressively vulgar […] children of the night,"[238] but in the several merchandise lines the gremlins are portrayed as simply puerile. In an obviously secondary place to Gizmo, the gremlins featured mostly in stationery and party items, such as those produced by Hallmark Ambassador, or humorous action figures, like those made by LJN. As Gizmo was sanitized so were the gremlins: the film's drunk and murderous vandals became harmless clowns. This domestication was often extended to the film's villain, Stripe. Though he is portrayed as the villain in many of the toys and action figures, he is also frequently relegated to the background (as in an action figure set by LJN that lists him as a nameless "gremlin") or in portrayals that present him as a thrill-seeking prankster instead of an evil monster — "Where's the party?" he asks in an Hallmark card invitation. The disparity is so strong even one of the advertisements points it out: "If you've seen the new movie 'Gremlins' […] you know how troublesome the gremlins can be. But at Hallmark, our gremlins are as tame as Gizmo."

Ideas of family-friendly fun were emphasized further by the marketing's heavy reliance on Christmas themes. Taking advantage of the film's winter setting, the main lines were released for the holiday season, replete with images of Gizmo dressed as Santa Claus and carolling gremlins. Certainly there is nothing unusual about a desire to capitalize on Christmas sales but this marketing decision was at odds with the film's box office tactic: *Gremlins* was released in the summer in order to avoid being labeled a Christmas film.[239] Furthermore, there was another popular holiday happening much closer to the film's release, Halloween. Yet, despite the many horror elements in the film, no scary toys were ever made nor were there plans for Halloween line. Thus, the merchandise strategy suggests two decisions: that only one of the two possible holidays was to be embraced, and that this holiday should be Christmas. Again, the idea of family (Christmas) and horror (Halloween) coexisting is firmly rejected, with the presence of one serving as antidote for the other. This strategy was so widespread

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[238] Kael, *State of the Art: Film Writings 1983-1985*, 188.
[239] White, "The Story Behind Gremlins".

that in Britain, after *Gremlins* was given a restricted rating, Warner's vice-president Julian Senior

came to its defense with a simple statement, "I think it is a lovely Christmas movie."[240]

These discrepancies between the marketing and the text of *Gremlins* are revealing of conflicting

attitudes and expectations of genres, childhood and the PG rating. Spielberg and Dante's attempt to

negotiate horror and family entertainment is in line with my previous suggestion of a more

segmented concept of childhood — the idea that there was a demographic between the PG and R

rating for whom this level of intensity was appropriate — but it also suggests an attempt to

renegotiate the boundaries of the horror genre, bringing it below the R frontier. The responses to

their work, on the other hand, illustrate the degree to which this was an uncomfortable thought:

critics explained it through a conflict, while the marketing choices remade *Gremlins* to anchor it on

the expectations of a traditional family film. Both point towards a cultural repulsion for the

combining of horror and children, but their suggestion of a social agreement over the boundaries of

horror is far from universal. On the contrary, the strength of these responses is matched by the

film's popularity at the box office and beyond — the will to unite family and horror appears to have

been more than Spielberg's whimsy. As before, PG-13 responded to these struggles by establishing a

tangible middle ground: horror was no longer entirely restricted but it was still not endorsed for all

child audiences.

<u>Conclusion</u>

It is clear that PG-13 signalled a major milestone for the film industry and American culture. In the

words of Roger Ebert, a year after its introduction, "There used to be children's movies and adult

movies. Now Spielberg has found an in-between niche, for young teenagers who have fairly

sophisticated tastes in horror."[241] Indeed, before PG-13, the R rating stood as the definitive

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[240] Anon, "Gremlins! Will You Let Your Children See Them?."
[241] Roger Ebert, "The Goonies," in *RogerEbert.Com* (1985).

gatekeeper of the rating system. It signalled the material that was considered unsuitable for minors and, in restricting their access to it, clearly separated children from adults. After PG-13 everything changed, as the following chapters will demonstrate. In this chapter, however, I sought to understand the social changes that led to the new classification by focusing on the three most significant controversies surrounding PG-rated films. Each of the films noted here — *Poltergeist*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Gremlins* — has been quoted by other scholars as factors in the MPAA's decision to introduce the PG-13 classification but it is only when they are considered together that a deep cultural shift becomes obvious. These three films lay out the progressive intensification of changes in 1980s' America: first, a push toward the notion of child-friendly horror, then an interrogation of the definition of childhood, followed by an attempt to combine violence, horror and counter-ideology with the family film, finally resulting in a major change to the rating system. In effect, the controversies over all three films, as well as their ultimate conclusion in the introduction of PG-13, represent a progressive questioning of three core concepts:

The first is childhood. More exactly, the challenge was on the structure of childhood, which had already been briefly suggested in the production and reception of *The Watcher in the Woods* in chapter one. The move was from a uniform block consisting of all minors, including children of all ages and teenagers, to a more segmented concept envisaging children and teenagers as clearly separate demographics, with more persistent but still minor, reference to the idea of the pre-teen as a group in between the two. Other concepts associated with traditional views on childhood, such as family values, were also progressively questioned, from the exaltation of childhood innocence in *Poltergeist* to its obliteration in *Gremlins*. Significantly, notions of traditional children's or family entertainment, associated with memories of Walt Disney, Norman Rockwell and Spielberg's *E.T.*, were first heavily relied upon and gradually rejected in favour of unconventional references, such as violent adventure and horror.

This new way for family entertainment is carved somewhat tentatively, as exemplified by *Gremlins*, but it soon takes on and the late 1980s burst with child-oriented horror films rated PG-13 (*Critters* [Stephen Herek, 1896], *The Gate* [Tibor Takács, 1987] and *The Monster Squad* [Fred Dekker, 1987], among others). The second concept in transformation is, therefore, the horror genre. If the idea of horror for young audiences was initially well-received, its incarnation in a form other than the soft shell of *Poltergeist* raised endless trouble. Characteristics of horror which had previously been taken for granted — its unsuitability for children, its violence, its disturbing and dangerous content — were quickly being put to the test, and the question of where to draw the line became a concern of the genre itself, alongside parents and critics: could horror adapt to a child-friendly future?

The final challenged idea is the rating system itself. As these films demonstrate, there was a growing distance between the rating system's scope and audiences' attitudes and values. The introduction of PG-13 can readily be seen to resolve, at least partially, all three of the challenges listed here. By adding on to the scope of the system, PG-13 rehabilitated it for a 1980s' society and established a middle-ground between opposing views regarding horror and child-suitable entertainment. Because it provided a solution for on-going tension, PG-13 is a strong indicator of the depth of these anxieties and the centrality of these topics to western society. Indeed, as further evidence of its cultural importance, PG-13 is the only major change to have ever been effected on the MPAA's rating system — despite the precedence in literature of NC-17, a classification that could be construed as mere change in nomenclature for the old X rating.

At this point, the reader will have begun to see a sense of progression in my argument. While chapter one presented the very conflicted inception of children's horror, this second chapter demonstrated how those tensions eventually travelled from a vague notion of audience desires and an individual studio's struggles into the core of American culture. The introduction of PG-13 not only legitimised anxieties over childhood and horror as social concerns of the period, it also provided an attempted official resolution. As the next chapter will show, however, PG-13 did not put an end to

these struggles. In fact, it drastically accentuated them by establishing a space within the boundaries

of the system where children's horror could legitimately thrive.

Chapter Three

Horror vs. Children: embracing, resisting and adapting to children's horror in *The Gate*

After a period of sporadic and tentative existence, children's horror greatly expanded in the mid- to late-1980s. Some of these releases were rated PG, such as *Invaders From Mars* (Tobe Hooper, 1986) and *Little Monsters* (Richard Alan Greenberg, 1989), but most received the newly-established PG-13 classification: *Critters* (Stephen Herek, 1986) and its sequels (*Critters 2* [Mick Garris, 1988] and later on, *Critters 3* [Kristine Peterson, 1991] and *Critters 4* [Rupert Harvey, 1992]), as well as *The Monster Squad* (Fred Dekker, 1987) and *Lady in White* (Frank LaLoggia, 1988), among others. None of these titles saw a reprise of the type of controversies which had surrounded *Gremlins*. But while the introduction of PG-13 appeared to resolve anxieties over violence and horror in children's entertainment, children's horror was still debated and often in very negative terms — only this time not by parents but by fans of the horror genre. Is there a connection between PG-13, an easing of anxieties over childhood and a rise in struggles over the horror genre in this period?

One of the most successful children's horror titles of this late-1980s proliferation was *The Gate* (Tibor Takács, 1987), a low-budget feature jointly produced in the United States and Canada. It was a box office hit,[242] quickly becoming the top Canadian grosser for its release year.[243] There was no great controversy around the film; however, critical reception was mixed, and peppered with very strong opinions and comments. If some reviewers found it "sweet,"[244] others loathed its very

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[242] Box Office Mojo, "The Gate."

[243] Kevin Thomas, "Allegory for Teens Lurks Amid Scary Fun of Sequel to 'the Gate'," *L.A. Times-Washington Post* 1992.

[244] Johanna Steinmetz, "Terror Swings with Humor in 'the Gate'," *Chicago Tribune*, 18 May 1987.

existence. Critic Kim Newman described *The Gate* as another of the "kiddie comedies" that "reduce the genre to the level of *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?*"[245] Similarly, Andrew Dowler of *Canada Cinema* called it "a vicious, venal lie" and "a corruption."[246] Both Newman and Dowler also suggested *The Gate*'s complete lack of cinematic achievement — for Dowler it was merely "decent,"[247] for Newman an irrelevant example of "safe horror"[248] —, comments which were echoed by other reviewers: one referred to the "rather routine horror-film scaffolding,"[249] a different critic labelled it "another horror movie made by people who have seen too many other horror movies" and a "cheap rip-off" of *Poltergeist*,[250] and another reviewer accused it of being "sub-Spielbergian stuff" and "hopelessly copycat […] basically powdered Spielberg on Zwieback toast and Stephen King on a stick."[251]

It is curious that a sub-standard film would provoke such strong opinions from critics of its time. It is even stranger that a copycat would be remembered decades later as a classic of the horror genre and of the 1980s. Indeed, in contrast to critical opinion at the time of its release, *The Gate* has endured in fan memory: it currently enjoys a quiet reputation as "cult hit"[252] and "classic horror," recently named one of MTV Geek's "Frightful Faves" for having "traumatized a generation."[253] A special edition DVD has also been released recently (Lionsgate, 2009), accompanied by rumours of a 3D remake being in the works. It is apparent that this split in opinions is largely generational. The writers of MTV Geek, for instance, are likely to be young people who have watched *The Gate* as a child at the time of its release; when they refer to a traumatized generation they mean specifically

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[245] Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*. Pag. 204
[246] Andrew Dowler, "The Gate," *Cinema Canada*, July/ August 1987.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*. Pag 204
[249] Gordon Walter, *Magill's Cinema Annual 1988* (New York: Salem Press, 1988).
[250] Christopher Hicks, "Too Many Other Shows Swing on 'the Gate'," *The Deseret News*, 21 May 1987.
[251] Michael Wilmington, "Movie Review: Bevy of Beasties Run Wild in 'Gate'," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 1987.
[252] B. Alan Orange, "Exclusive: Tibor Takacs Takes Us Back through 'the Gate: Monstrous Special Edition'," http://movieweb.com/exclusive-tibor-takacs-takes-us-back-through-the-gate-monstrous-special-edition/.
[253] Charles Webb, "Mtv Geek's Frightful Faves: Reopening 'the Gate' (1987)," http://geek-news.mtv.com/2012/10/10/mtv-geeks-frightfulfaves-reopening-the-gate-1987.

the "junior horror fans" of the 1980s.[254] Critical remarks, however — particularly Kim Newman's

remarks on how children's horror films were "reducing the genre to the level of *Scooby-Doo*" —,

indicate that these differences in opinion were not simply about taste differences between adult and

"junior" horror fans but part of something bigger, a battle fought not between children and adults

but between the adults who defended horror as unsuitable for children (and R-rated) and those who

saw no harm in children as horror audiences.

The tension between these two sides is palpable in the critical reception of *The Gate*, but also in its

production history. The film ping-ponged between the creative visions of Michael Nankin, the film's

writer, and Tibor Takács, its director — where one wanted to make a traditional adult-oriented

horror film, the other was adamant about it being a fairy-tale for pre-teens. The positions of the two

filmmakers illustrate the broader cultural conflicts of this period. Nankin, siding with tradition,

appeared to reject children as horror audiences and to be confused about the pre-teen as a valid

demographic, thus pushing for the R rating and disapproving of Takács' choice to make the film

family-friendly. Takács, siding with change, not only recognised the pre-teen as a social group but

also wished to cater to this demographic exclusively, insisting on the PG-13 rating. The question of

which rating to target was relevant in that it was so strongly tied with assumptions about audiences

(children for PG-13, adults for R) and about the definitions and expectations of a horror film,

particularly to do with its intensity and the role of child characters.

Critics and reviewers likewise discussed expectations, not just of the horror film, as outlined earlier,

but also of the children's film. These had less to do with intensity but more to do with education,

moral values and messages. Here, again, opinions were split. If some thought *The Gate* was a

nefarious influence, others saw it as an empowering film, perfectly suited for an audience of children

and pre-teens, particularly as it dealt with issues specific to their age group. This concern for the pre-

teen demographic, or rather this awareness of it as a demographic, was on the rise, already common

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[254] Ibid.

enough that reviewers of other features, such as *The Lost Boys* (Joel Schumacher, 1987) would

lament filmmakers' decisions to target older teenagers as opposed to pre-teens. What becomes

apparent from the divergences in production and critical opinion is that debates about *The Gate*

were very often about clashing assumptions about horror and its audiences as well as notions of

childhood. Indeed, horror and childhood were often discussed together, in a way that is reminiscent

of the controversies that first prompted the creation of PG-13 (see chapter two), with frequent

suggestion of ideas of morality and of an adult-dominated cultural environment, particularly in

relation to the horror genre. The strongest comments by reviewers and critics appear precisely in

relation to ideas of change in those areas, frequently interpreted as corruption or degradation.

In this chapter I will argue that these opposing reactions to *The Gate* are evocative of transition and

of cultural fears of change. More exactly, I propose that the social move toward the acceptance of

the pre-teen as a distinct demographic affected other aspects of the cultural environment of the

period. As the pre-teen became more present and better catered for in horror, the genre and its fan

base were faced with two potential choices: to adapt, leaving behind old motifs and generic

expectations, or to champion the "old ways" and repudiate children's horror. My analysis will begin

by exploring the resistance to children's horror in the critical reception of *The Gate*, followed by a

look at the contrasting opinions expressed about the film's morality and views of childhood. The

chapter will finish with the scrutiny of *The Gate*'s representations of children and uses of horror

motifs, framed around the conflicts between Michael Nankin and Tibor Takács, to illustrate the new

concepts circulated in children's horror.

Children keep out! Rating wars and the denial of children's horror

One of the strongest voices against *The Gate* and similar horror films aimed at young audiences,

prolific in the late 1980s, came from critic Kim Newman:

> *With children, adolescents or childish young men in the leads, and with one scene of*
>
> *knockabout looning for every dose of effects-dripping monstrousness, [films like* The Lost
>
> Boys *and* The Gate*] provide the MTV generation with something to watch every three*
>
> *minutes but are unable to get seriously scary, or even seriously funny. All they prove is*
>
> *nobody needs a safe horror picture.*[255]

Newman's outrage at children's horror and other films mixing horror and humour is a result of his attitude toward the horror genre. According to his personal definition of horror, shaped by the films of the late 1960s and 1970s, true horror does not mix with "knockabout looning" or child protagonists. Not only that, their presence in horror is shameful, vastly diminishing the quality and the appeal of the genre as a whole by making it "safe." But Newman's assumptions are not restricted to the contents and edge of horror but also to its audience. The films he critiques are aimed at "the MTV generation," a fact he considers to be another perversion of the genre. The subtext in his comment is that this "MTV generation," unlike himself and others like him, has a diminutive attention span and intellectual inability to appreciate "seriously scary" horror; their presence, therefore, is also disgraceful to the genre. What Newman does not consider is the contradiction of critiquing a film aimed at a group of which he is not a part (that is, children, teenagers and young adults) with reference to the values and judgments of the social group he belong to (that is, the adult viewer of a certain age and generation). In so doing, Newman works from the assumption that his demographic is the correct audience for horror and therefore the one that should be pleased, and that by catering to the desires and needs of a different group, horror filmmakers are sinking the genre's standards.

Similar thoughts are expressed by Andrew Dowler in his review of *The Gate*. Like Newman, Dowler seems to have a very strict idea about what is and is not horror, even opening his piece with a lengthy distinction between "extreme horror" and the mainstream (that is, in his words, "horror for

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[255] Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, 204.

people who don't like horror"). Classifying *The Gate* as mainstream, Dowler had the following to say: "At worst, [*The Gate* is] flat and pointless. At best, though, there's nothing great, nothing to give any but the least experienced viewer a rush of real pleasure or thrill."[256] The idea of different kinds of horror for different kinds of audiences beyond the extreme/ mainstream divide seems to evade Dowler; this preconception of a default or correct demographic for ("real") horror impedes him of questioning if those "least experienced viewers" (that is, children) could perhaps be the very audience targeted by *The Gate* — much like Newman failed to consider that what is "safe" for an adult might indeed be "seriously scary" (or even "seriously funny") for a child.

These remarks, however, are more than simple displays of ageism and scorn for young people as valid audiences; they are part of a larger effort to defend the horror genre during this period. The notion might seem absurd at first; the 1980s were, after all, a decade of great proliferation for horror, which was often tied to commercial success, as evidenced by the many franchises. The type of horror being made, however, was a big departure from the films of the 1960s and 1970s, the main change being the target audience, which now emphasised teenagers and children as opposed to adults only. Although it could be argued that the R rating had always been appealing to teenagers, the introduction of PG-13 opened the door for horror to decrease its intensity and target children, pre-teens and teenagers more directly. While this was a commercially liberating shift, and a key factor in the developing of the children's horror trend, it also had phenomenal impact on the wider cultural perceptions of horror: a genre that had, since 1968, been almost exclusively associated with the R rating and a certain kind of counter-cultural ideology had now become unrestricted, open to children.

The problem with this association was, of course, that children's entertainment was seen to be, as noted by Newman in the passage quoted above, "safe:" unchallenging and unquestioning. And sure enough, it did not take long for these associations to be brought to light in critical and academic

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[256] Dowler, "The Gate."

work as, for example, in James B. Twitchell's book *Dreadful Pleasures*, where the author argues that horror is in essence a juvenile genre, fit not for adults but for children and teenagers.[257] Until 1984, the rating system had provided some protection against these criticisms through the R rating: any horror film under this classification had been reviewed by a panel of experts (in this case, the MPAA) and declared to be unsuitable for children. After PG-13, however — especially given the abundance of children's horror and teen horror —, the same was not true. For horror aficionados like Newman, Dowler and others of their generation, this "juvenilization" of horror was thus perceived as a threat to the integrity of the genre.

Their rejection of this change in horror was often manifested precisely through conflicting thoughts on ratings and horror. Andrew Dowler, for instance, illustrated *The Gate*'s inferior position through a comparison of its characterisation with that of extreme ("real") horror. His example of a good extreme horror film was *Evil Dead II* (Sam Raimi, 1987), an adult-oriented film rated X in the United States and R in Canada.[258] This sort of comparison seems both unfair and out of place but it was not uncommon. "I remember at the time," Tibor Takács has said in interview, "people were always comparing *The Gate* to *A Nightmare On Elm Street* [Wes Craven, 1984] or something where to me the films had a completely different type of audience."[259] The comparisons with horror for older audiences carried on to this day and are visible in how modern viewers remember and interpret *The Gate*. In the DVD feature commentary, for instance, Takács commented on the disappointment felt by some viewers at the film's ending, which some describe as "a cop out."[260] "Sometimes people forget it's a PG-13 movie for kids and try to match it for gore and intensity against R-rated 80s horror classics," the director noted in an interview. "It's really a different animal."[261]

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[257] Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*.
[258] Dowler, "The Gate."
[259] Robert Saucedo, "Badass Interview: The Gate's Tibor Takacs," http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2012/02/09/badass-interview-the-gates-tibor-takacs.
[260] Michael Nankin and Randall William Cook Tibor Takács, "Audio Commentary," in *The Gate* (Lionsgate, 2009).
[261] Orange, "Exclusive: Tibor Takacs Takes Us Back through 'the Gate: Monstrous Special Edition'".

Elsewhere, Takács has also described the film as "a creature feature […] a sort of enchanting movie and not a hard-edged slasher film," and lamented that not everyone respected this difference and did not see that "the movie was always intended for tweens."[262] But, in light of some of the reactions to *The Gate*, it strikes me that what Takács interprets as confusion about the film's target audience might instead be confusion about the film's genre, caused by clashing expectations. Indeed, these comparisons with R-rated films of the same period seem to come from the disbelief that any horror film, even one rated PG-13, could be aimed at anyone other than teenagers or adults. Two conclusions can be drawn here. First, that the idea of a horror film for children was still foreign for horror fans and critics, despite the quick multiplication of children's horror titles. And second, that the PG-13 classification had not yet established a strong identity, allowing genre to trump it when it came to defining audience expectations.

The ambiguity around PG-13, and the notion that R was the more appropriate rating for all horror was visible throughout *The Gate*'s production process. "Some people wanted it to be an R," revealed Takács; but for the director, PG-13 was the only option "or it wouldn't make any sense." In the director's view, the concept of children digging up a hole to hell was "strictly the fantasy of an eleven-year-old. I don't think many fifteen or sixteen-year-old were going to be thinking about that."[263] For Takács, therefore, the rating to aim for must match the film's content and target audience rather than match what is expected of a certain genre. Furthermore, the director's comment suggests very clear demographics for each rating — pre-teens for PG-13 and teenagers for R —, as well as their different thematic trends: for example, adventure, family and personal empowerment in PG-13 films like *The Gate*, and romance and sexuality in R-rated franchises such as *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980).

Collective agreement was never reached on the right classification for *The Gate* franchise. When plans for *The Gate 2: The Trespassers* (Tibor Takács, 1990) were made, the filmmakers were

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[262] Saucedo, "Badass Interview: The Gate's Tibor Takacs".
[263] Tibor Takács, "Audio Commentary."

instructed by producers to aim for an R, despite the sequel remaining very close in spirit to the original. On the topic of ratings and expectations of horror, it is useful to mention the case of *The Lost Boys*, another youth-oriented horror released on the same year as *The Gate*. Originally, *Lost Boys* was conceived as a children's horror film: the script took the Frog brothers, "two chubby eight-year-old cub scouts" as main characters and pitched them against 5th grade (11 year-old) vampires.[264] The film had been inspired by the children's classic *Peter Pan*, and developed the idea of the lost boys as creatures of the night since they could fly, did not age and wandered the night.

The production was set to be headed by Richard Donner who had directed *The Goonies* in 1985 but, due to circumstance, ended up in Joel Schumacher's hands, who promptly made drastic changes to the script: he "hated the idea"[265] of children fighting vampires and so decided to age up all the characters, make the story sexier and gorier and aim for an older teenage audience. Schumacher described Donner's original vision for the film as "sort of a cutesy, G-rated movie aimed at young kids."[266] This is a strange statement, however, since not only had the G rating long fell out of favour at the box office (see chapter one), Donner's intention was to make *The Lost Boys* as a companion piece to *Goonies*,[267] itself a PG-rated film with an even heavier television rating of PG-14. It is likely that Schumacher meant his remark to denote not the film's actual intended rating or tone, but as a reflection of his own personal opinions on the script's intensity, as well as his expectations from a vampire story (not "cutesy") and a horror film (restricted, not "aimed at kids").

What these examples demonstrate is a resistance to change. Not only is there an implicit rejection of the notion that genres might be fluid concepts, there is also an attempt to champion a very specific definition of horror through the rejection of children's horror as real horror. This denial was expressed through a chain of assumptions: that children are not a legitimate audience for horror, and that to scale down horror's intensity, both through the PG-13 rating and through an attention to

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[264] Anon, "The Story Behind the Lost Boys," http://www.gamesradar.com/the-story-behind-the-lost-boys/.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.

children, is to lower its quality and appeal. Both of these strongly imply an adult-dominated cultural environment suddenly threatened by the inclusion of children.

Transitioning attitudes: childhood and moral values

Assumptions about horror and its (un)suitability for children were ideological and cultural, as explored in the previous section, but often also appeared to be tied to certain notions of morality, specifically in relation to children and the values that ought to be instilled in them. Several reviews of *The Gate* expressed concern the messages the film might send to its audience. Andrew Dowler, for example, described the film as a

> *vicious, venal lie, a corruption and denial of the highest values of art and the core value of fairy tales — the value of truth, truth presented as fable or allegory so that all of us, and especially the kids, can see quite clearly the operations of good and evil, virtue and vice, innocence and experience, strength and weakness - the actions of human beings and their consequences — particularly their consequences. [...] [*The Gate*] denies all your hard-earned knowledge and all the knowledge you hope and pray your kids are going to grow into.*[268]

This knowledge refers to the subject of death: Dowler repudiated *The Gate*'s choice of bringing characters back to life in its "impossibly happy ending," concluding that "this is a movie that feeds into that infantile misapprehension" that death can be reverted.[269] I have already pointed out how Dowler felt *The Gate* to be an inferior horror film and these comments suggest the critic believed it to be a corruption of not only the horror genre but the children's film. Specifically, it was morality and good values that was at stake for the critic, and the dangers of teaching "lies" about life and the world we live in to children, an audience he perceived as especially vulnerable.

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[268] Dowler, "The Gate."
[269] Ibid.

Interestingly, Dowler's views on horror parallel his views on children's films. In both cases, the critic

is in favour of "truth," manifested in horror through "extreme" filmmaking and in the children's film

by the clear separation of good and evil. The paradox in Dowler's views is that fairy tales, fables and

allegories, which he seems to approve of as vehicles of "truth" for children, are often made of pure

fantasy, including fantasy on the subject of death; indeed, death or death-like states are frequently

reversed, as seen in Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, or Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,

to name only a few. It strikes me, therefore, that Dowler's rejection of *The Gate* stems not from its

fantasy elements but from its disregard for genre rules: while death is seldom final in children's

stories, the same is almost never true of horror narratives — the two genres operate on different

models of "truth." The problem with *The Gate*, then, was that it was built according to two different

sets of rules. Moreover, these rules brought with them expectations and moral perspectives: which

"truth" should children be taught?

Andrew Dowler found the values of *The Gate* offensive but other critics disagreed. For reviewer

Gordon Walker, at the core of *The Gate* is "a charming fantasy-fable about love" with a "shamelessly

positive" message "to and about young people."[270] In the same spirit, Johanna Steinmetz of the

Chicago Tribune read the film as morally sound and life-affirming. She began her review with the

words "Once upon a time," and repeatedly evoked the idea of fairy tale narratives and a family-

friendly atmosphere, describing the film as being "perfectly adapted to living room viewing." She

eventually defined *The Gate* thus: "This is good-natured terror […] This is terror with a moral (the

trouble starts when the parents leave their kids alone for the weekend). And this is terror with a

heart (nobody stays dead)."[271] The contrast with Dowler's inflamed words is striking. Steinmetz's

review included mention of the film's "several messages about the value of love, self-sacrifice and

the Bible," with frequent reference to the good values and good behaviour children and young

teenagers may learn from *The Gate*, as the film's horror narrative is also, "by no coincidence, a

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[270] Gordon Walker, *Magill's Cinema Annual 1988* (New York: Salem Press, 1988).
[271] Steinmetz, "Terror Swings with Humor in 'the Gate'."

struggle by the kids to control their own demons, the temptations to yield to peer pressure and to disobey their parents."

With no mention of "the MTV generation" or its moral and cultural decadence, these reviews embody a different set of values and beliefs about childhood and child-appropriate viewing. There is a sense of keen awareness about the realities of youth during this period and the challenges they might be facing, obvious in Steinmetz's reference to latchkey children, a topical issue of the 1980s, but also in her remarks on issues of early adolescence such as peer pressure and disobedience. This concern with children is matched by a lack of preoccupation with defending horror. In fact, the child-focus and reduced intensity of *The Gate* are seen to be positive changes to the genre. This awareness of a changing childhood was also part of Tibor Takács' motivation in making *The Gate*. "The movie was always intended for tweens," Takács has said, specifying that the theme of the film was "tweens empowering themselves."[272] Contrary to Andrew Dowler, Takács did not conceptualise pre-teens or older children as vulnerable and passive but instead as individuals both capable of agency and in need to exercise that power. But Takács has also noted that his intuition about this demographic was not in the social majority: "People really never talked about tweens as an age group back then. Now Disney specifically caters to them quite a bit. At the time, though, people just lumped tweens in with teenagers."[273]

Still, this "lumping in," whether it was with teenagers or with younger children, was slowly changing. Once again, *The Lost Boys* provides a good supporting example of these changing. In spite of Joel Schumacher's strong feelings on the subject, not all critics appreciated the film's focus on teenagers. Indeed, it was often mentioned how suitable the film's story could be to discuss issues relating to children and young adolescents, and how the emphasis on older teenagers was both a distraction and a disappointment. Dave Kehr of The Chicago Tribune, for instance, wrote: "The issues raised by vampire movies seem most pressing during adolescence, and 'The Lost Boys' — or, at least, the

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[272] Saucedo, "Badass Interview: The Gate's Tibor Takacs".
[273] Ibid.

original story by Janice Fischer and James Jeremias — does an imaginative job of translating those issues into contemporary teenage terms." Later in his review, Kehr accused Schumacher of not developing the psychological centre of the tale provided by Sam, the younger character, in order to focus on shocking visuals, which were a great part of the film's campaign for the R rating.[274] Similarly, Rita Kempley of The Washington Post noted how the film had "more in common with 'The Goonies' than with really first-rate vampire lore." She continued, "It's an off-key [...] mix of teen romance and preteen adventure that's at its best when it focuses on the kid brother [Sam], [...] [and is] weakened when the filmmakers pander to older-teen tastes by inserting video love interludes."[275]

As with the positive reviews of *The Gate* and Tibor Takács intentions, these comments value children and specifically pre-teens as valid audiences, demonstrating a social preoccupation with the issues that are specific to them and distinct from those of older teenagers. Not only does this suggest a shift in attitudes about the place of children in wider cultural spaces, it also indicates an acute rise in social awareness of the pre-teen as a distinct social group, which existed only embryonically in the early and mid-1980s (see chapters one and two).

Demons or demon-slayers? Representations in between paradigms

Another clue pointing toward a moment of transition can be found within *The Gate* itself, in its representations of childhood. As the reader will remember, I have also analysed representations of children in chapter one, where I proposed *The Watcher in the Woods* as a tentative, incomplete attempt at making child-oriented horror. Specifically, I pointed out as problem areas the reproduction of themes hostile to youth, such as the Terrible Child motif, and the persistent othering of the two main characters, which brought the film closer to 1970s' social and cultural environments than to those emerging in the 1980s. I also noted the way in which the film constructed childhood,

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[274] Dave Kehr, "'The Lost Boys' a Vampire Film Thirsting for a Good Story," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 July 1987.
[275] Rita Kempley, "'The Lost Boys' (R)," in *The Washington Post* (1987).

representing only a young child and an older teenager without the presence of pre-teens. *The Gate*

also makes use of some of these motifs, including the Terrible Child, but shows a much greater

awareness of its target audience. Instead of following a blueprint for horror, *The Gate* playfully

spoofs these themes, adapting them to non-othered characters. In spite of this, the film's

representations are not without ambiguity. As in *The Watcher*, the tensions stemmed strongly from

clashes occurring outside the text, during production: there were strong creative and ideological

clashes between Michael Nankin, the film's writer and Takács, its director, who did not share the

same vision of horror nor of childhood.

In Michael Nankin's original draft of *The Gate*, which was not a child-oriented narrative, the main

characters Glen and Terry were younger children, respectively eight and nine years old. When the

film was given a new direction and made into a family-friendly feature, the characters were then

aged up. In the DVD commentary, Nankin expressed reservations about the success of the change,

revealing that he "never quite felt like [he] really made the characters old enough." Tibor Takács

disagreed: "I always thought they were age-appropriate […] They're plain ten-year-old […] That's

part of the charm of the movie, the reality of those kids."[276]

This was one of many disagreements about children and childhood between the two filmmakers,

and one which is relevant to the argument I have made in the previous section: while Nankin has

trouble evoking a clear image of a pre-teen child, preferring to "lump them in" with young children

or older teenagers, Takács seems confident in his awareness of this group's "reality." The divergence

suggests, as critical opinion did previously, the existence of two different ways of viewing childhood

in the late 1980s: either segmented in two (young children and teenagers, with nothing distinct in

between the two), or as a more complex period, segmented in three (young children, pre-teens and

teenagers). If Nankin's position seems reminiscent of *The Watcher in the Woods* and 1970s horror,

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[276] Tibor Takács, "Audio Commentary."

his personal stance on his child characters and their role in the film makes the connection even

clearer:

> *Everything they do is wrong. Everything they do they're not supposed to do, or is cruel, or is*
>
> *dangerous. And they basically get what they deserve. [...] I always thought horror movies*
>
> *become scarier if your protagonist deserves bad things. You're just waiting for them to get*
>
> *their come-uppance.[277]*

This quote is reminiscent of film scholar William Paul's thoughts on children in the horror film,

particularly the popular figure of the demonic child. For Paul, characters of malevolent children

engage the (adult) audience's notion of "physical harm for the child's own good,"[278] and dramatically

focus on the pleasure the adult viewer finds in the discovery of evil in the child as well as in its

eventual punishment. These child characters are described by Paul as being on the cusp of puberty

and possessing a disturbing balance of precociousness and regressiveness in their character and

behaviour. Their precociousness often relates to the difference between what they know or do and

what is socially perceived to be the appropriate behaviour or level of knowledge for a child (notions

of displaced sexuality, for example, are often explored).[279]

It is not difficult to find similarities between these Terrible Child characters and the characters of *The*

Gate. In fact, elements of the script and the mise-en-scene often explicitly point toward this motif,

such as Glen's tree-house (a symbol of childhood) having been built on a tree which is literally

rooted in hell; or the damage left on the roof of the house by Glen's rockets, reminiscent of Carrie's

apocalyptic fury in Brian de Palma's horror classic of 1976. But it is through the characters of Glen

and Terry that *The Gate* refers most directly to the evil child tradition in horror. Terry is described by

Glen's father as confused, angry and destructive; traits that are attributed to his lack of adult

supervision and which he expresses through his enjoyment of acts of mild animal cruelty.

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[277] Ibid.
[278] Paul, *Laughing, Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*.
[279] Ibid. Pag 282-283

Furthermore, his unconventional image is in sharp opposition to the traditional picture of the wholesome child: Terry dresses tough (in dark colours, death imagery, and band patches on his jacket), listens to heavy metal music and lives in a bedroom covered top-to-bottom in band posters and images of demons and the occult. His special relationship with the unseemly forces of demons and pagan mythology is further explored in one of the film's later plot points when Terry becomes a demon and turns against Glen — a warning to susceptible children, perhaps, about the effects of keeping bad company.

This idea of Terry as a bad influence is matched by Glen's extreme vulnerability. Like Glen himself says at one point, he would jump off a bridge if Terry did. But unlike Terry, Glen is under constant adult supervision and relies on his parents, the babysitter, his older sister and Terry for protection and guidance. This reliance on authority, however, does not stem from the boy's exemplary obedience but from his crippling insecurity which later leads to overwhelming feelings of guilt and a simultaneous fear of and desire for punishment. These feelings of guilt initially appear out of place but have been intentionally planted in the script by Michael Nankin, who often referred to Glen's guilt during his feature commentary. For example, when describing Glen's emotional state during one of the first scary scenes with the demons, Nankin spoke not of anxiety or fear but of guilt.[280] This guilt is presumably Glen's response to his parents' anxieties and their mistrust of his character, and closely relates to the overwhelming punishments delivered to (and, in part, desired by) him: in Glen's mind, if his parents think he is capable of being bad then he must be so; and if he is bad, he must be punished.

The articulation between Glen's guilt and his simultaneous fear of and desire for punishment is very clear in the scene Nankin describes as his "favourite,"[281] in which the demons incarnate Glen's parents. Believing these demon-parents to be real, Glen runs into their embrace — only to hear his demon-dad roar, "You've been bad!" followed by an attempt to strangle the boy to death. Glen is

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[280] Tibor Takács, "Audio Commentary."
[281] Ibid.

eventually able to defend himself by pushing his fingers into his demon-dad's eyes until his head

erupts in a pulpy mess. Glen looks at his hands in shock and horror: they are covered in his father's

blood. Nankin describes this scene as "five really good ideas: the parents come home, you've been

bad, dad tries to kill you, you kill your father while your mother laughs."[282] This description suggests

strong negative emotions, the guilt of having non-filial thoughts and of disappointing as well as the

fear of punishment and of humiliation — all of which are central to Glen's character.

These representations, alongside their creator's comments, are illustrative of a particular view of

children. They can be traced back to the horror genre's tradition, but also circulate certain social and

cultural positions of its time, namely the firm-handed parenting styles of the period[283] and a number

of anxieties related to children and the potential negative effects of external influences: horror films,

as suggested by *The Gate*'s own critical reception, but also comic books, heavy metal music and the

depiction of violence and amoral behaviour in the media.[284]

Nevertheless, while the representations in *The Gate* may express all of the above, they also

negotiate a different perspective. Takács comments emerge as a counter-point to Nankin's views:

for the director, the film's intent was to tap into "nostalgia about childhood and, if you're a kid, your

experience as a kid" but it was important that it not be "mean-spirited," a characteristic Takács felt

was overpowering in 1980s' horror.[285] Instead, he wanted to tell a story that was enchanting. This

desire, coupled with the film's strong commitment to stay with the children's point of view, is part of

what altered the tone of the film and its representations. In Takács vision, *The Gate* was not a film

about children being demons or worrying that they might be; rather it was about overcoming

demons, about children "empowering themselves."[286]

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[282] Ibid.

[283] Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2003).

[284] For example Medved, *Hollywood Versus America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*. And Barker and Petley, *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*.

[285] Tibor Takács, "Audio Commentary."

[286] Saucedo, "Badass Interview: The Gate's Tibor Takacs".

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This attitude comes across most clearly in Glen's character development. In the first two thirds of the film, Glen is a cowering, weepy picture of sadness, stuck in a routine of running, hiding and submission. As the film progresses, however, Glen transforms into a driven, strong and confident child. Two scenes illustrate this progression. First, the resolution to the "You've been bad!" sequence. Although this segment reveals the extent of Glen's anxieties through a symbolic patricide and illustrates the boy's feelings by showing the blood on his hands, it ends on a note of innocence: the blood magically disappears, much to his amazement — his blame has been lifted. The second illustration comes at the end of the film, after Glen banishes the Demon Lord back to hell. The film's colour palette sets the tone: dark clouds dissipate and a new dawn shines through, its rays reaching the hero boy. Later on, this new beginning and the idea of Glen as a new child is apparent in his body language: chin up, chest out, a confident stride and a happy smile on his face. Thus, in the end Glen has defied rather than conformed to expectations of the vulnerable child.

Likewise, Terry ultimately proves a parody of the evil child as the film deconstructs his tough image: while listening to his heavy metal records, Terry jumps on his bed and, throwing his rainbow bedcover around his head like a cloak, pantomimes the lyrics. These child-like touches are supplemented with suggestions of his vulnerability, both physical and emotional: his "nerdy" appearance (skinny body, glasses), as well as his grief over his mother's recent death and the impossibility of finding comfort in his absent father. Critical perception of his character is also telling. One reviewer described Terry as especially "cute" in his suggestion of the "owlish curiosity and sarcasm of a bookish 12-year-old;"[287] another speaks of him as a "lonely child."[288] These comments indicate that two of his Terrible Child attributes — his knowledge of adult secrets and his destructiveness — were not perceived to be evidence of a dangerous nature. Instead, the former was seen as a product of positive curiosity and the latter a result of Terry's sadness. Furthermore,

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[287] Wilmington, "Movie Review: Bevy of Beasties Run Wild in 'Gate'."
[288] Steinmetz, "Terror Swings with Humor in 'the Gate'."

this reception shows that Terry elicited sympathy from adult viewers, a notion that does not apply to traditional evil child characters.

Terry and Glen are nuanced characters, negotiating a transition in attitudes toward childhood and children in horror. On the one hand, there are suggestions of child characters as projections of adult anxieties and reflections of traditional ideas about children, innocence and the horror genre; on the other hand, *The Gate* expresses a conflicted desire to move away from these attitudes and into a more open and complex view of horror and children, through narrative developments and parody.

Most importantly, the representations in *The Gate* differ from those of the traditional horror film of the 1970s and earlier children's horror like *The Watcher in the Woods* in their choice of point of view. Previously, the child in horror was strictly associated with otherness, and existed mainly in the inhuman figures of the sociopath, the demon, the alien, the ghost and the Antichrist. *The Gate*, however, illustrates a rehabilitation of the child in horror. By bringing it to the centre of its narrative, the film presents the child not only with higher visibility but also with humanity, metamorphosing it from an object of repulsion to an object of identification and empowerment for the viewer — specifically for the child viewer, here acknowledged and catered for as horror audience. This shift in representation comes with a shift in narrative themes. *The Gate* is based on the issues that are relevant for a young audience (family, friendship, feelings of powerlessness), ignoring the common theme of sexuality found in teen-oriented films of the same period, such as the *Friday the 13th* or *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, as well as the social concerns expressed in adult-oriented films like *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) or *The Exorcist*. Likewise, the tone is different: *The Gate* is concerned primarily with the soothing of pre-teen anxieties and the encouraging of self-confidence, empowerment and solidarity — themes often found in children's films but, up to this point, far more uncommon in horror.

Conclusion

It is in this late 1980s period that the children's horror trend really started to take shape. This is both statistically, as children's horror features proliferated in number, and structurally, as cohesion of form was established between those titles. Critics frequently compared *The Gate* to *Poltergeist* or, more frequently, described it as "yet another tussle with devilish gremlins"[289] or labeled its villains "relatives of Gremlins.'"[290] But *The Gate* is distinct from *Poltergeist* and *Gremlins* in a key way, not mentioned by these critics but addressed repeatedly by Tibor Takács:

> *I never really thought about* Gremlins *the movie or referenced it during the making of* The Gate*.* Gremlins *felt more like an adventure movie than a horror film. […] I thought it didn't focus on the characters it was about, the gremlins.* The Gate *is about Glen and his imagination. Not the minions.*[291]

In other words, the difference is perspective. *The Gate*, as most children's horror titles of the same period and later, is both for and about pre-teens. Takács' feature, moreover, was one of the first to implement what would later become the three foundations of children's horror (see chapter six): First, this focus on pre-teen main characters, with the occasional older teenager side character (or, more commonly in later examples, a younger child sidekick), thus moving away from the family unit as main character, as used in *Poltergeist* and *Critters*. Second, the use of narrative themes of empowerment, self-confidence and closeness with friends and family. And third, the mixing of comedy with straight horror, using humour in between scary sequences to reduce the film's overall intensity without downplaying its scares (a strategy used also in its contemporary feature *The Lost Boys*).

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[289] Edward Jones, "Special Effects Make 'Gate' a Cut above Average Thriller," *The Free lance-Star*, 10 June 1987.
[290] Hicks, "Too Many Other Shows Swing on 'the Gate'."
[291] Orange, "Exclusive: Tibor Takacs Takes Us Back through 'the Gate: Monstrous Special Edition'".

But despite being a period of consolidation for children's horror, the late 1980s were also a period of

great anxiety about these films, suggesting social attitudes in transition and adaptation. It is useful

here to compare the tensions around *Gremlins* (see chapter two) to those generated by *The Gate*

three years afterward, and note the curious shift in the balance of socio-cultural struggle: as

anxieties about childhood eased up, anxieties about horror (and about the films children watched)

rose sharply. As this chapter demonstrated, even if the criticism against *The Gate* was far from

unanimous, when it was voiced it was usually expressed with very strong words and directed

specifically at change — whether it was change in the horror genre or change in the moral values

depicted in children's entertainment.

As I have been arguing, these two issues are connected and a shift in their balance is not

coincidental. From the early 1980s to the introduction of PG-13, the key concern had been to

establish an appropriate level of intensity for children's films, particularly those films which, by

virtue of social and industrial changes, now included heavier content and targeted an audience of

older children. As I have expanded on in the two previous chapters, films in the horror genre which

attempted this approach in the early years of the decade were accompanied by a clear progression

of social preoccupation with childhood. Specifically, these concerns were centred on the idea of a

potentially emerging demographic between "small children" and "teenagers or "older teenagers."

After PG-13 was introduced, this demographic became less vague: as the rating implied, it included

older children, up to the age of thirteen — the pre-teens critics wrote about in relation to *The Gate*,

and the tweens Tibor Takács wanted to empower. As well as signalling a wide social acceptance of a

new segment of childhood, the PG-13 rating gave filmmakers a new level of intensity to aim for. No

longer restricted to the PG rating, writers, producers and directors of children's horror could now

make their films with fewer restrictions, a change which resulted in a large number of PG-13

children's horror releases. And here, the status quo was disrupted: the horror genre had suddenly

become unrestricted and appropriate for children, a drastic change in how it had previously been

defined and a sharp turn in its default levels of intensity and violence. These changes challenged

assumptions about the way horror "should" be and about its proper audience. As the critical

reception of *The Gate* showed, there was strong resistance to the idea of children as a valid horror

audience, a conflict which persists to this day: although pre-teens have long been acknowledged as

one of the many audiences of horror, PG-13 films often struggle to meet the approval of horror fans.

As an example of these attitudes, we need only turn to recent articles discussing the release of

Carrie (Kimberly Peirce, 2013) — their authors have described PG-13 as "the certificate of

unscariness,"[292] and R as "the stamp of approval for many horror junkies,"[293] leaving no doubt about

the connection between children and PG-13: "*Carrie* should be rated R because adolescence is rated

R."[294]

Besides making the genre unrestricted, the pre-teen audience also brought a new set of themes into

horror narratives. Unlike adults or teenagers, pre-teens and children might not have society or

sexuality as their main concerns and worries in life; instead, their anxieties are more likely to stem

from their world of childhood: coping with family dynamics, making friends, building their identity,

becoming more independent, and coming to terms (or challenging) their lack of power in an adult-

oriented world. Indeed, all of these issues feature prominently in children's horror, while the topics

of sexuality (arguably the main concern of teen horror) or other issues like social power, religion and

politics are generally left behind.

This move toward child-oriented narratives then promoted a striking change in perspective. With

children's horror films, horror no longer presented life from a strictly-adult vantage point; it was now

also aligned with children and their points of view, and dedicated to explore their unique concerns

and anxieties. Unsurprisingly, this shift impacted the genre's tropes and motifs. The Terrible Child,

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[292] Tess Lynch, "Carrie Secures an R Rating, Is Poised to Capture the True Horror of Adolescence," Grantland, http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/carrie-secures-an-r-rating-is-poised-to-capture-the-true-horror-of-adolescence/.
[293] David Crow, "New Carrie Tv Spot Warns of R-Rating," Den of Geek!, http://www.denofgeek.us/movies/carrie-remake/196688/new-carrie-tv-spot-warns-of-r-rating.
[294] Lynch, "Carrie Secures an R Rating, Is Poised to Capture the True Horror of Adolescence".

one of the most popular figures of 1970s' horror, became the target of parody, as children's horror steadily un-othered the figure of the child, and brought it both visibility and humanity in the genre. These new children were promoted through their narratives as objects of identification, rather than repulsion, and of empowerment, rather than fear — as both Glen and Terry so clearly illustrate in *The Gate*.

In these first three chapters, I have described the 1980s as a decade of steady (if tense) progression for the children's horror trend: starting turbulently with *The Watcher in the Woods*, pushing boundaries with *Gremlins* and PG-13, and eventually crystallising in *The Gate*. As we move into the 1990s, the struggle continues — albeit with resolution on the horizon. Here, my argument bifurcates: the next chapter explores how tensions around the horror genre slowly begun to dissipate, while chapter five focuses on the end of anxieties over the figure of the pre-teen.

<u>Chapter Four</u>

The end of children's horror? Re-building generic frontiers in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

In the timeline I have been constructing in this thesis, there has so far been no respite for the children's horror trend: tumbling between failures and successes, children's horror appears to have spent most of its first decade overcast with ambiguity or busy locking horns with parents, moral campaigners and horror fans. But as the 1990s dawned, the calm finally settled. The features which made their ways to theatres across the United States were greeted with praise and spawned very few, if any, controversies. Their number dwindled, however, and the few surviving films showed clear signs of mutation: more light-hearted in tone, keenly interested in grabbing an adult audience as well as a child audience, and conspicuously void of explicit references to the horror genre. Moreover, neither filmmakers nor promoters or even critics seemed interested in connecting these films to the trend's past or to establish it as a new form of children's horror, instead labelling it as a sophisticated and adult-oriented form of family entertainment. How can this development be explained and did it spell death for children's horror?

As I developed in the previous chapters, the horror genre changed dramatically in the 1980s. Not only did it embrace children and teenagers as audiences, it actively changed its tropes and motifs to represent a more youth-centered environment, most notably in the first children's horror titles and the teen-focused slasher films, very popular in the period. Horror was extremely profitable at the box office and on video, but soon there were accusations that a juvenilization of horror had occurred

and that the genre had become childish. The 1990s saw a backlash: as the slasher cycle declined in popularity, horror replaced teenagers with big budgets, reputed stars and literary gravitas, changing its image from childish to sophisticated. Tellingly, it was in this period that a horror film, *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), first won a Best Picture Oscar (as well as Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor and Best Actress).

Part of this success may be attributed to a change in the terms used to define horror and the associations critically evoked by the genre. *Silence of the Lambs* was not simply received as a horror film but as a psychological thriller; Vincent Canby of the New York Times, for instance, does not refer to the film as horror but as suspense thriller and suspense melodrama. Moreover, the critic highlighted the film's artistry throughout, referring to the director's subtlety and the dialogue's qualities as "tough and sharp, literate without being literary." Canby's verdict was that "the movie is clearly the work of adults."[295] This review provides a window into the climate of horror in the 1990s and the things that were endorsed by critics, filmmakers, producers and, through the box office, audiences: maturity, sophistication and prestige, all three associated with adult-oriented material.

The decade thus saw a revival of classic monsters and classic literature, as well as other elements with an established cultural link to art and quality, like auteur directors or star actors famous for their character pieces or with a proven record of Academy approval, always with emphasis on sophistication and maturity. An example would be *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Kenneth Branagh, 1994), which critic Hal Hilson defined as "a contemporary highbrow version of [an] ageless horror classic."[296] Another good example is *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992). Variety considered it "faithful to its literary source," with "grand romantic goals" and a "serious tone" — in other words, a film of "extreme adult nature"[297] —, while Vincent Canby thought it "transcend[ed]

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[295] Vincent Canby, "Methods of Madness in 'Silence of the Lambs',"
http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D0CE0DB123EF937A25751C0A967958260.
[296] Hal Hinson, "'Mary Shelley's Frankenstein' (R)," http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/maryshelleysfrankensteinrhinson_a01af8.htm.
[297] Todd McCarthy, "Review: 'Bram Stoker's Dracula," http://variety.com/1992/film/reviews/bram-stoker-s-dracula-1200431014/.

camp to become a testimonial to the glories of film making as an end in itself," and added, "It's as if Mr. Coppola were saying: 'You want a horror film? You got a horror film.'"[298]

The content, narrative and aesthetical approaches in horror also shifted in this period. The werewolf, for instance, moved away from associations with puberty and youth to connections with the yuppie crowd and adult office workers in *Wolf* (Mike Nichols, 1994), a film described by Variety as "decidedly upscale."[299] In his review, Roger Ebert wrote:

> *"Wolf" is both more and less than a traditional werewolf movie. Less, because it doesn't provide the frankly vulgar thrills and excesses some audience members are going to be hoping for. And more, because Nicholson and his director, Mike Nichols, are halfway serious about exploring [the topic]. [...] The tone of the movie is steadfastly smart and literate.[300]*

The vampire was likewise stripped of its *Lost Boys* adolescent image and made erudite and glamorous in *Interview with the Vampire* (Neil Jordan, 1994), "an intelligent [...] reading"[301] of Anne Rice's novel of the same title according to Todd McCarthy.[302] The ghost too was transformed in critically-acclaimed titles like *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) and the romantic *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990). The serial killer, made popular by the slashers of the 1970s and 1980s, went from babysitter murderer to intellectual in films which approached horror in a psychological and cerebral way, such as *Silence of the Lambs*, *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995), and the supernatural *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992), praised by Ebert for "scaring me with ideas and gore, instead of simply with gore."[303]

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[298] Vincent Canby, "Coppola's Dizzying Vision of Dracula," The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E0CE2D61539F930A25752C1A964958260.
[299] Todd McCarthy, "Review: 'Wolf'," http://variety.com/1994/film/reviews/wolf-1200437584/.
[300] Roger Ebert, "Wolf," http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wolf-1994.
[301] Todd McCarthy, "Review: 'Interview with the Vampire'," Variety, http://variety.com/1994/film/reviews/interview-with-the-vampire-1200439504/.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Roger Ebert, "Candyman," RogerEbert.Com, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/candyman-1992.

Despite this adult focus, teenaged horror audiences were not entirely neglected in the 1990s. But

the films which targeted them also adopted a more sophisticated, and often ironic, approach. The

hit blockbuster *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) for instance, controversially gained favour for its clever

and satirical attitude, in particular toward the slasher genre and the conventions established in the

previous decade. Variety described it as "more intelligent than the norm," and although it predicted

that the "underlying mockish tone won't please die-hard fans," the review also highlighted the

"sophisticated parody," deeming *Scream* "an interesting stab at altering the shape of horror."[304]

Indeed, *Scream*'s popularity breathed new life into the slasher genre, helped along by another

successful franchise, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997), which critics described

as "smart like 'Scream'"[305] and "a polished genre piece with superior fright elements [...] just clever

enough to rise above the usual fodder."[306]

Children, however, did not receive similar treatment. Their presence in horror roles became

unfashionable, even earning an industrial reputation as box office poison — as Variety wrote about

The Sixth Sense, "the positioning of a child at the center of otherworldly goings-on, [...] could spell

sleeper status [for this film]."[307] The prediction turned out to be unfounded on this particular case,

but other releases of the decade featuring children did not do well at the box office or critically. On

the one hand, the evil child motif appeared to have become irreparably outmoded. *Children of the

Corn II: The Final Sacrifice* (David F. Price, 1992) was deemed "so poorly conceived that its symbolism

has no internal logic,"[308] and John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned* (1995), a remake of Wolf Rilla's

classic of the same title (1960) provoked tedium and laughter instead of fear. "Fans and students [of

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[304] Leonard Klady, "Review: 'Scream'," Variety, http://variety.com/1996/film/reviews/scream-1117436711/.
[305] Richard Harrington, "'Summer' Time: The Living Is Deadly," The Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/review97/iknowwhatyoudidlastsummerharr.htm.
[306] Derek Elley, "Review: 'I Know What You Did Last Summer'," Variety, http://variety.com/1997/film/reviews/i-know-what-you-did-last-summer-111731125/.
[307] Todd McCarthy, "Review: 'The Sixth Sense'," Variety, http://variety.com/1999/film/reviews/the-sixth-sense-1200458827/.
[308] Stephen Holden, "A Satanic Cult Caper in the Bible Belt," The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F0CE6DE1F3BF933A05752C0A965958260&partner=Rotten%2520Tomatoes.

the original] [...] likely will be bored," wrote Peter Stack in his review, adding that "the trademark

glowing eyes from the first film are now in color like shining marbles and seem rather silly. [...] It

takes almost no time at all for the alien kids to look entirely uninteresting, partly owing to the nerdy

way they're dressed."[309] This sense of *Village of the Damned* as a film removed from the reality of

the 1990s continued in Richard Harrington's review for the Washington Post, in which the critic

wondered if Carpenter had "lost his mind or just his talent," and reviewed the film as dull and

"populated by actors we already tend to speak of in the past tense."[310]

On the other hand, the notion of children performing evil acts was increasingly met with social

resistance and even repulsion, continuing the 1980s' distancing from the Terrible Child motif. Critic

Hal Hinson reviewed *The Good Son* (Joseph Ruben, 1993) negatively, stating that as soon as "the

demon-seed plot kicks in [...] the picture degenerates into a campy mess." He then ended his review

with a loaded morality question: "where were the responsible adults when this thing was made?"[311]

The query was echoed by Roger Ebert: "Who in the world would want to see this movie?" Ebert

continued:

> *One of the reasons the movie feels so unwholesome is that Macaulay seems too young and*
>
> *innocent to play a character this malevolent. [...] You want to confront the filmmakers who*
>
> *made him do it, and ask them what they were thinking of. For that matter, what were*
>
> *Culkin's parents thinking of [...]?[312]*

The repulsion *The Good Son* elicited from critics and the lack of seriousness with which *Village of the*

Damned was received are two sides of the same coin: evil children in film were a thing of the past

and, moreover, in bad taste. Not only had horror changed, general attitudes toward children and

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[309] Peter Stack, "Carpenter's 'Village of the Damned' a Dreary Place," San Francisco Chronicle, http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Carpenter-s-Village-of-the-Damned-a-Dreary-Place-3034711.php.
[310] Richard Harrington, "'Village of the Damned' (R)," The Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/villageofthedamnedrharrington_c01363.htm.
[311] Hal Hinson, "'The Good Son' (R)," The Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thegoodsonrhinson_a0a843.htm.
[312] Roger Ebert, "The Good Son," RogerEbert.Com, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-good-son-1993.

Filipa Antunes   *"Children beware!"*

childhood had also shifted, notoriously toward a model based on notions of innocence, as illustrated

by Ebert's review of *The Good Son*:

> *The movie is rated R. Market surveys indicate that kids want to see it, probably because it*
>
> *stars their "Home Alone" hero. This is not a suitable film for young viewers. I don't care how*
>
> *many parents and adult guardians they surround themselves with. And somewhere along the*
>
> *line, a parent or adult guardian should have kept Macaulay out of it, too.*[313]

Similar views are suggested by Janet Maslin of the New York Times in her review of *Village of the*

Damned. "Don't take the children, not even if they fix you with ice-cold stares and try to make you

do their bidding," Maslin wrote, even as she acknowledged that the same motifs might once have

been very enticing for young audiences: "With its baleful little villains, 'Village of the Damned' is

even creepier to watch as a parent than it was to see as a child."[314] Parental anxieties about the

horror genre's ability to corrupt youth are therefore continued from the 1980s, only with a

significant difference: horror filmmakers now supported rather than challenged this assumption.

Indeed, films like *The Gate* or *Gremlins* became increasingly hard, even impossible, to find as

theatrical releases in the 1990s. Not only had children's presence became unacceptable in horror, as

evidenced by the genre's key output and their critical reception, children had also been eschewed as

valid audiences. The figure of the child became once again ingrained with Otherness in releases such

as *The Unborn* (Rodman Flender, 1991) and *Mikey* (Dennis Demster-Denk, 1992), while children's

perspectives and pre-pubescent anxieties were mostly ignored or explored in adult terms, as in

Afraid of the Dark (Mark Peploe, 1991). Moreover, the majority of key releases was rated R, further

removing horror from its 1980s' fling with PG-13 and, by association, from young audiences.

It would have been difficult for the children's horror trend to remain immune to this sharp turn in

industrial and cultural atmosphere. What I propose in this chapter is that the trend's development

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[313] Ibid.

[314] Janet Maslin, "Demons' Eye Problems Compound Creepiness," The New York Times,
http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=990CE7D71238F93BA15757C0A963958260.

matched this overall climate change, as children's horror theatrical releases moved toward prestige, seeking legitimisation through the approval of adult audiences. This approval was gained not only by producing more sophisticated material but also by avoiding any content that might be challenged as unsuitable. As a result, the tone of children's horror became more layered, more playful and more conventionally close to other children's and family features, sublimating the horror elements that remained. This, coupled with horror's general move away from youthful audiences, revolutionised the trend's cultural position: shedding its genre hybridism and moving out of its parental house of terror, children's horror settled comfortably in the family genre.

To explore this suggestion, I will take *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Henry Selick, 1993) as my main case study. In the first section of this chapter, I will analyse the adult-oriented focus of its promotion and reception, noting how auteurism and technology were highlighted in order to entice adult viewers over child audiences, thus suggesting a desire to separate children and horror. This idea is strengthened in the second section, where I will explore the way Disney reclaimed *Nightmare Before Christmas* as a family classic (rather than an adult-oriented film), moving from an initial separation between children and horror toward a complete reworking of the children's horror trend by integrating it into the family genre. To end the chapter, I will briefly bring in *The Witches* (Nicolas Roeg, 1990) and *The Addams Family* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991) to propose these developments as broader occurrences in theatrical examples of children's horror.

A *Nightmare* for adults: art, innocence and technology

When Tim Burton first thought of Jack Skellington in the early 1980s he was working for Disney. It was, in his own words, a "bad mix,"[315] and Burton saw his pitch categorically rejected. The idea was "too crazy for Disney in those days," according to director Henry Selick.[316] As developed in chapter

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[315] Tim Burton, *Burton on Burton*, ed. Mark Salisbury (London: Faber, 2000), 9.
[316] John Hartl, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' Returns," *The Seattle Times*, 22 October 2000.

one, Disney's situation in the early 1980s was unstable and although the studio was willing to

expand it was also wary of taking risks. Burton was no stranger to this compromise. His first short,

Vincent (1982), "was a little odd, [...] because Disney seemed to be pleased with it, but at the same

time kind of ashamed. [...] [T]hey didn't know what to do with it."[317] Another project,

Frankenweenie (1984) fared slightly better and was selected for release with *Pinocchio* (Norman

Ferguson, T. Hee et al., 1940) until it received a PG rating and Disney "freaked out […]. So it met with

the same response as *Vincent* in a way, which was 'Oh, this is great, but we have no plans to release

it. *Ever*.'"[318] The volte-face came about only after Burton had left the studio for greener pastures,

becoming an established and extremely profitable director with Warner Bros., who funded *Pee-*

wee's Big Adventure (1985), *Beetlejuice* (1988) and the blockbuster hit *Batman* (1989). Wanting to

retrieve an asset, Disney promised to finally produce *Nightmare Before Christmas* in exchange for

Burton's renewed favour.[319] The bait worked. Burton's next live-action project, *Ed Wood* (1994),

would be Disney's and *Nightmare* began production with director Henry Selick at the helm.

But it soon became apparent that Disney had little faith in *Nightmare Before Christmas*. It was "kind

of a stepchild project," Henry Selick revealed in interview. "They never felt [it] was a Disney film."

The director continued to say that Disney's "biggest fear" was that the core audience would hate the

film and not come to cinemas to see it. "It was very much, 'We don't have high expectations. It's

kind of too dark and too scary.'"[320] There is a sense of déjà-vu here; a flashback to 1980 and the

disaster of *The Watcher in the Woods* — as well the flops that followed it, *Something Wicked This*

Way Comes and the catastrophic *Black Cauldron*. The difference, however, was that Disney now had

a safe outlet for this kind of project: Touchstone Pictures. It was under this banner that *Nightmare*

was released and, accordingly to Disney's fears and expectations, received an adult-oriented

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[317] Burton, *Burton on Burton*, 24-25.
[318] Ibid., 39.
[319] Anon, "The Nightmare before Christmas 3-D: 13 Years and Three Dimensions Later,"
http://uk.ign.com/articles/2006/10/20/the-nightmare-before-christmas-3-d-13-years-and-three-dimensions-later?page=1.
[320] Ibid.

promotional campaign without the usual tactics employed for a Disney animation, such as a pop

song tie-in, fast food chain deals or extensive toy lines. Deliberately distancing the film from

children's entertainment (as well as horror), the marketing campaigns instead worked on

establishing a link between *Nightmare* and art as well as technological advancement.

To this end, one of the first marketing tactics adopted was to attach Tim Burton's name to the film's

title: *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The addition caused some confusion about who

directed the film, which persists popularly to this day, but Henry Selick has conceded that "it was

probably a good decision. […] [T]here was *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, so I think they wanted to

differentiate from that — and also get Tim's audience in the theater."[321] Indeed, the addition of Tim

Burton's name gave potential audiences an immediate and clear indication of what to expect and, as

Selick pointed out, also what not to expect: Burton's name separated *Nightmare Before Christmas*

from the horror genre — including children's horror — by forging an even stronger association with

art and innocence, two characteristics of Burton's persona.

When analysing critical responses to Tim Burton's work, including the films before *Nightmare*, it

quickly becomes apparent that Burton was perceived as an auteur, a filmmaker with a strong and

unique artistic vision. There are references to his "bad-boy genius,"[322] his "artist's eye"[323] and his

style is seen to be so markedly his own that even in relation to a film he did not direct, such as

Nightmare, the "unforgettable compositions" and "poetic posings," described as "aesthetically

stunning," are assumed to be the product of his mind.[324] Further evidence of Burton's status as an

established auteur comes from his embracing by Cahiers du Cinéma, the film publication most

strongly associated with auteur theory and criticism — in an interview conducted in 1994, the

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[321] Marlow Stern, "Henry Selick on Directing 'the Nightmare before Christmas'," http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/10/29/henry-selick-on-directing-the-nightmare-before-christmas.html.
[322] Desson Howe, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' (Pg)," *The Washington Post*, 22 October 1993.
[323] Joe Morgenstem, "Tim Burton, Batman and the Joker," *The New York Times*, 9 April 1989.
[324] Howe, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' (Pg)."

Cahiers reporter focused on the notion of a continuum between Burton's work, his freedom to pursue his artistic vision and authorship.[325]

Nightmare's premier at the New York Film Festival further strengthened the film's artistic aura, prompting critics to make numerous connections between Burton's work and other auteurs and movements already culturally established as artistic: the Washington Post described Burton as "Oscar Wilde [...] raised on E.T.A Hoffmann, the Brothers Grimm and the expressionistic German films of the prewar period such as 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari;'"[326] while Variety staff described the sets and backgrounds in *Nightmare Before Christmas* as "surreal takeoffs on 19th century engravings and etchings," and noted that "the characters inhabiting them are endlessly inventive, as in a Bosch painting."[327] These art credentials were further bulked up with the reputation of others involved in the production of Burton's films. Danny Elfman, for instance, received many mentions for *Nightmare*: "10 great songs composed by Danny Elfman (who collaborated with Burton for 'Batman' and also wrote the theme tune for 'The Simpsons')."[328]

As well as being associated with prestige and artistic quality, Tim Burton's persona also evoked an intellectual view of cinema, in particular of the horror genre. Burton's love of horror was, first and foremost, outlined as a benevolent passion rather than a corrupting force. The director himself contributed to this impression, describing his relationship with horror in terms opposite to those popularly used during waves of moral panics, i.e. therapeutic symbolism, connection and humanity, rather than corruption, alienation and monstrosity. Burton has written about his ability as a youth to "make direct links, emotionally, between that whole Gothic/ Frankenstein/ Edgar Allan Poe thing and growing up in suburbia,"[329] and frequently highlighted the aesthetic beauty of horror, relating it (as well as his hero, Vincent Price) to classically acclaimed genres and screen idols: "those movies,

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[325] Cahiers du Cinema, *Cahiers Du Cinema Presents the Hollywood Interviews*, Talking Images Series (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 124.
[326] Howe, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' (Pg)."
[327] Todd McCarthy, "Review: 'The Nightmare before Christmas'," Variety, http://variety.com/1993/film/reviews/the-nightmare-before-christmas-1200433742/.
[328] Howe, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' (Pg)."
[329] Burton, *Burton on Burton*, 32.

just the poetry of them, and this larger-than-life character [Vincent Price] [...] spoke to me in the way Gary Cooper or John Wayne might have to somebody else."[330]

Nevertheless, his admiration for the genre's aesthetics and themes appeared as secondary to Burton's ability to see the flaws and fantasy of horror. "I always found more humor in horror [than in comedy]," the filmmaker has said in interview. "One of my favorite things was in the original 'Frankenstein,' where we have this hunchbacked, twisted man with an absurdly short cane walking up this expressionist stairway and, halfway up, he stops to pull up his sock."[331] Burton has displayed a similar attitude toward the Halloween holiday, claiming that "it's only scary in a humorous way."[332] His ability to critically distance himself from horror set Burton apart from the stereotypical "horror junkie" moral campaigners worried about; moreover, Burton himself frequently downplayed the influence horror has had on his work and his creative process. For example, he discredited the idea of a direct link between *Frankenweenie*'s imagery and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), instead attributing his visual choices to influences in his real life.[333]

In this way, Burton positioned himself as someone who sees beyond horror — not a childish, susceptible horror fan but an intelligent adult viewer capable of filtering horror through art and humour. Though he may have been enchanted by horror (to the point of referring to monster movies as "my fairy tales,"[334]) his artistry and intelligence revealed adult sensibilities and allowed his use of horror to be seen as parody or a kind of indulgent, knowing nostalgia instead of direct influence or even homage. This is how critics framed his work, particularly his use of gothic imagery and horror motifs. As one reviewer put it, "It is Mr. Burton's peculiar gift to find benign mischief in that kind of spectacle."[335] His work was dubbed "sweetly malignant fife,"[336] "macabre humour and

[330] Ibid., 4-5.
[331] Morgenstem, "Tim Burton, Batman and the Joker."
[332] Bill Jones, "He Kept His Nightmare Alive," *The Phoenix Gazette*, 22 October 1993.
[333] Burton, *Burton on Burton*, 36.
[334] Ibid., 3.
[335] Janet Maslin, "Infiltrating the Land of Sugar Plums," *The New York Times*, 9 October 1993.
[336] David Ansen, "Movies: Tim Burton Looks at Holiday Hell," *Newsweek*, 1 November 1993.

tongue-in-cheek horror,"[337] "fright gags, [...] mock-scariness," and imbued with the certainty that

"older viewers should be thoroughly in sync with Mr. Burton's comic tastes."[338]

If the weight of art and intellectual quality in Tim Burton's persona contributed heavily to distancing

his work from the horror genre as it was conceived in the 1980s, it equally distanced his films from

children by marking adults as the audience most able to discern Burton's vision. As one critic wrote,

"Although [*Nightmare*'s] soul is sweetness itself, its surface is disturbing and intentionally so, and its

clever and satiric sense of humor is undoubtedly pitched to adult tastes."[339] Another reviewer

separated *Nightmare*'s pleasures to different audiences, predicting that "younger viewers will

probably get involved in the story of Jack's adventures, [but] older ones may be more impressed by

the visual look of the film."[340] The notion of children possessing no aesthetic reasoning is most

certainly debatable but the statement is in line with auteur culture and its adult-centric philosophy

of film: "Although they are apparently intended for children, in reality do your films perhaps mean

something to adults?" a *Cahiers* reporter asked Tim Burton, dissatisfied with the idea of a quality

film mainly aimed at children.[341]

In any case, an association with children was not entirely disadvantageous in the case of Tim Burton,

his public persona and the selling of *Nightmare* to adult audiences. Because Burton was heavily tied

to childhood, in particular to notions of childhood innocence, his work was steadily pulled away from

associations with horror. Burton was "the most unassuming of directors," who sounded "like a kid"

and projected the impression of "still healing the wounds he received in junior high school;"[342]

furthermore he was "genuinely sweet-spirited," "easy to take [...] for an innocent"[343] and able to

awaken nurturing instincts in those around him ("almost everyone on the set want[ed] to take care

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[337] Quentin Curtis, "Amazing What You Can Do in a Fortnight," *The Independent*, 27 November 1994.
[338] Maslin, "Infiltrating the Land of Sugar Plums."
[339] Kenneth Turan, "Movie Reviews: Burton Dreams up a Delightful 'Nightmare'," *Los Angeles Times* 1993.
[340] Elisabeth Perrin, "Tim Burton Guides to the Screen Another Tale from the Dark Side," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 17 October 1993.
[341] Cahiers du Cinema, *Cahiers Du Cinema Presents the Hollywood Interviews*, 127.
[342] Perrin, "Tim Burton Guides to the Screen Another Tale from the Dark Side."
[343] Morgenstem, "Tim Burton, Batman and the Joker."

of him"[344]). Aspects of his personality and behaviour, such as a lack of conversational skills, were

then excused as "a legacy of childhood and adolescence."[345] Burton's aura of child-likeness was

never far removed from his creative inclinations — "long years of living inside his head, of sketching

and scheming, of beginning to work out the weird landscapes of his films"[346] —, or his image of

tormented Peter Pan: "It's clear why Burton had such a firm grasp of children's tastes. He wasn't

that far removed from his own childhood, with its painful memories that still haunt him."[347]

Other critics have also pursued this image of Burton as child-like. "He never raises his work above

the heads of children — which is true of all his work," wrote Howe in a review. "He pulls adult minds

down to the surreal darkness of childish imagination — where the real nightmares are. But through

Burton's eyes, these dark dreamscapes aren't bad places at all. In fact, they're quite wonderful."[348]

Howe's wording is of particular interest in this passage. Although the critic posits Burton as a child-

like artist, highlighting his innocence, candid imagination and lack of pretence, he also suggests

these qualities as aimed to adults — Burton's seductive "dark dreamscapes" are entirely without

malice; almost a purifying, angelic blessing to an audience of jaded adults. Indeed, it is this very

perception of benevolence that sublimated Burton's overt use of horror. His work may have been

dark, gothic or weird but it was not radical — on the contrary, as Variety critic Todd McCarthy noted,

the "attitude behind [*Nightmare Before Christmas*'s] story's telling is iconoclastic and a bit twisted,

but not at all subversive."[349] McCarthy highlighted the film's happy ending as "thoroughly

conventional,"[350] while other critics chose to note Burton's relationship with Disney, describing

Burton as "a graduate of the Disney factory"[351] and a "Disney-style household word,"[352] thus linking

him with Disney's brand of wholesomeness and tradition. Burton himself contributed to this

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[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Howe, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' (Pg)."
[349] McCarthy, "Review: 'The Nightmare before Christmas'".
[350] Ibid.
[351] Howe, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' (Pg)."
[352] Maslin, "Infiltrating the Land of Sugar Plums."

perception, often preferring his work to be linked to children's classics instead of horror classics. In response to a comment about *Vincent* appearing to be inspired by *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), Burton said "it probably has more to do with being inspired by Dr Seuss. It just happens to be shot in black and white, and there's a Vincent Price/ Gothic kind of thing that makes it feel that way. I grew up loving Dr Seuss."[353]

These three aspects of Tim Burton's persona — auteurism, a critical approach to horror, and a connection to child-like innocence — worked together to make *Nightmare* a breed of its own. Though the association with horror was there for those who wished to make it, it was eclipsed by much stronger influences and ties, which pitched the film to adults before children and associated it with art before horror. The critical focus on the film's use of technology is yet another factor that strengthens these associations. Most critics explained stop-motion animation, unfamiliar to a large portion of audiences at the time, with special emphasis on its demanding nature and the "painstaking skill" [354] involved in this "labor-intensive process,"[355] as well as the "enormous"[356] achievement represented by *Nightmare* — it was "a major step forward" for stop-motion animation.[357] These comments imbued the film with an artistic feel but also with technological appeal, which some critics contrasted with more traditional ways of making animation (namely Disney's usual techniques).

As with Tim Burton's name, these characteristics distanced the film from child audiences because they were discussed exclusively in ways that emphasized adult enjoyment and admiration. The nature of the stop-motion technique, for instance, was always described as requiring an extraordinary deal of patience, skill and dedication. One critic remarked on the "infinite care"[358] it required, another on the "daunting" amount of "painstaking planning and grinding work involved,"

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[353] Burton, *Burton on Burton*, 19.
[354] Ansen, "Movies: Tim Burton Looks at Holiday Hell."
[355] Turan, "Movie Reviews: Burton Dreams up a Delightful 'Nightmare'."
[356] Roger Ebert, "Burton's Dreamy 'Nightmare'," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 27 October 2000.
[357] Maslin, "Infiltrating the Land of Sugar Plums."
[358] Perrin, "Tim Burton Guides to the Screen Another Tale from the Dark Side."

adding that "at maximum efficiency, the *Nightmare* crew could turn out no more than 70 seconds of finished film per week."[359] The intensity and minutia of the technique was also frequently mentioned by those involved with the film, namely Henry Selick who revealed how the team "had to grow a studio, where virtually every camera would be on some kind of motion-control system. That was one reason why I spent three years on the movie."[360]

The animators were similarly projected with a light of astonishing artistic skill and dedicated maturity. They are, in Henry Selick's words, "rare people,"[361] and, in reference to the need to act out the puppets actions, "our Jack Nicholson — that level of actor."[362] But, interestingly, despite Selick and Burton's praises for the artists' talent,[363] critics more often than not chose to focus on the technology itself as the reason for the film's much-praised fluidity. Bill Jones, for instance, remarked on the advantage Burton gained by virtue of having to wait a decade to produce this film as he could then make use of better technology.[364] The use of "sophisticated computers"[365] which now allowed the camera to be moved as well as the puppets in front of it was also noted by other critics who remarked on the cinematic qualities of the film and the flexibility of Henry Selick's camera, which "swoops and swirls, as if it were on loan from Brian De Palma."[366]

Both the nature of stop-motion and the nature of *Nightmare* as a landmark in animation are framed in ways that build adult interest, depicting the film as a piece of art and technology rather than merely a children's animated film. Indeed, critical reception as a whole seems to indicate that one of *Nightmare*'s greatest triumphs, and one of the reasons why it was so well-received, was its "revolutionary application of stop-motion animation,"[367] which "revitalized"[368] the practice and

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[359] Turan, "Movie Reviews: Burton Dreams up a Delightful 'Nightmare'."
[360] Hartl, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' Returns."
[361] Jones, "He Kept His Nightmare Alive."
[362] Ibid.
[363] Perrin, "Tim Burton Guides to the Screen Another Tale from the Dark Side."
[364] Jones, "He Kept His Nightmare Alive."
[365] Hartl, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' Returns."
[366] Curtis, "Amazing What You Can Do in a Fortnight."
[367] Turan, "Movie Reviews: Burton Dreams up a Delightful 'Nightmare'."

turned Hollywood's spotlight on "one of the oldest and yet most unfamiliar techniques in filmmaking."[369] This was seen as "something refreshingly different" for those "with an aversion to conventional animation"[370] — not the children, to be sure. Indeed, conventional animation is another way to say Disney, and the comparisons steadily favoured *Nightmare*. For one critic, it was "not a cartoon like Aladdin or Beauty and the Beast,"[371] while Betsy Sharkey of the New York Times called it "an anomaly in the Disney animation equation. [...] [It is] a long way from [...] Aladdin, the studio's most successful animation film to date [...] [and] light-years away from [...] Disney's 1991 animated hit, Beauty and the Beast."[372] Sharkey also noted how the "highly stylized look and the technical advances represented by Nightmare" was "quite distant" from cel animation, which she described as being "as familiar as an old shoe to most adults and children."[373] Other critics ascribed a sense of greater authenticity to stop-motion, describing it as "more personal"[374] than drawing and noting the three-dimensional sets, "illuminated by real lights producing lifelike shadows."[375] Notions of greater authenticity also came across in the way Henry Selick and Tim Burton discussed the technique. Burton talked about it being "handmade" and possessing "more weight, more of a place,"[376] as well as "a funkiness and roughness"[377] in comparison to cel animation. Selick likewise described it as "infinitely more difficult than cartoon animation,"[378] as the team must "go for the final take in the first take."[379]

Mentions of the potential enjoyments for child audiences or of the film's attention toward children were, for the most part, drowned under the above comments. The image of *Nightmare Before Christmas* was clearly defined in adult-oriented terms — art, technology, sophistication —, very far

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[368] Jones, "He Kept His Nightmare Alive."
[369] Perrin, "Tim Burton Guides to the Screen Another Tale from the Dark Side."
[370] McCarthy, "Review: 'The Nightmare before Christmas'".
[371] Turan, "Movie Reviews: Burton Dreams up a Delightful 'Nightmare'."
[372] Betsy Sharkley, "Tim Burton's 'Nightmare' Comes True," *The New York Times*, 10 October 1993.
[373] Ibid.
[374] Jones, "He Kept His Nightmare Alive."
[375] Jeff Strickler, "Merry Scary Christmas," *The Star Tribune*, 22 October 1993.
[376] Perrin, "Tim Burton Guides to the Screen Another Tale from the Dark Side."
[377] Ibid.
[378] Jones, "He Kept His Nightmare Alive."
[379] Ibid.

from the previous examples in the children's horror trend, particularly those of the late 1980s (see chapter 3). This suggests an interesting development in the trend: although the visual themes had not significantly changed, the commercial pitch suffered a drastic shift, tilting "children's horror" heavily toward adult audiences. As well as raising questions about the children's part of the label, this development also raised questions about the horror side, since the genre was hardly mentioned (promotionally and critically) and, when it appeared, it was quickly sublimated with notions of innocence and art.

A *Nightmare* for everyone: family over horror

What is curious about the promotional strategies and critical reception outlined above is that they do not seem to be in complete agreement with Disney's research on prospective audiences for *Nightmare*, nor are they in agreement with the film's present-day status. According to the New York Times, Disney's research indicated three potential audiences: "the preteen set, people drawn by Tim Burton's reputation, and adults attracted by the film's artistic and experimental nature."[380] The latter two groups were well represented as we have seen but the same cannot be said about the pre-teen group, who was left in the background. The decision seems to have been deliberate and likely guided by an overzealous desire to lower risks and potential damage to the Disney brand. But once Disney realised this ugly duckling had become a much-loved and profitable swan, *Nightmare* was rebranded as family film and, later on, as a Disney Christmas classic.

As Paul Sherman from The Boston Herald reported, Disney "infamously underestimated the movie's appeal, making half-hearted merchandising deals that didn't meet consumer demand and caused much of the original merchandise to become instant collector's items."[381] Aside from this small line of toys, Disney did not employ any of its trademark promotional tactics for animated and family films, such as the integration of a potentially chart-topping pop song or deals with children's meals

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[380] Sharkley, "Tim Burton's 'Nightmare' Comes True."
[381] Paul Sherman, "Disney Has Dreams of Profits from 'Nightmare'," *The Boston Herald*, 28 October 2000.

at fast food restaurants. And the release strategy matched the merchandising efforts: *Nightmare*

opened modestly, then spread to around 500 screens and, on Halloween, to over 1,600 cinemas

across the United States. The box office numbers were "eye-popping" and the film topped the box

office two weekends in a row, but the success streak was cut short, as Disney could not extend

Nightmare's theatrical run without prompting competition with its planned big holiday release, *The*

Three Musketeers (Stephen Herek, 1993).[382]

Remembering Disney's initial rejection of the project, Henry Selick has said that "it had no

relationship to what Disney's identity was, so they didn't develop it. [...] It was one of those

moments of, 'I can't believe they don't get it!' but that's what happens."[383] The root of Disney's

worries and the reason for its lukewarm approach to a family-oriented promotional campaign can

therefore be traced to the problem of defining *Nightmare*, specifically how its dark tone would mesh

with the established Disney brand and the expectations of its traditional family audience. "When you

work with Disney," Tim Burton has said in interview apropos of *Nightmare Before Christmas*, "you

have to take two things into consideration: the studio itself and its public reputation. Inevitably that

caused problems [...]. Disney's public reputation can be very onerous."[384] The thought was echoed

by Jeff Strickler, critic for The Star Tribune:

> *It took nerve to make such a complete break from the warm-and-fuzzy genre to something*
>
> *that can be as outrageous as this is in spots. (Kidnapping Santa Claus! How's that going to*
>
> *play with the kiddies?) One imagines that Disney executives lost more than a little bit of sleep*
>
> *worrying about* The Nightmare Before Christmas.[385]

Indeed, they seem to have done. In yet another flashback to the production of *The Watcher in the*

Woods (see chapter 1), Jeffrey Katzenberg (then-chairman of Walt Disney Studios) and other Disney

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[382] Scott Mendelson, "'Nightmare before Christmas' Turns 20: From Shameful Spawn to Disney's Pride," Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2013/10/15/how-the-nightmare-before-christmas-went-in-20-years-from-shameful-offspring-to-disneys-favorite-son/.
[383] Stern, "Henry Selick on Directing 'the Nightmare before Christmas'".
[384] Cahiers du Cinema, *Cahiers Du Cinema Presents the Hollywood Interviews*, 121-22.
[385] Strickler, "Merry Scary Christmas."

executives continuously provided Selick and his team with suggestions aimed at softening the film's tone. "We know it's not for 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds," said Katzenberg to the press. "There are some images that are too scary for really young ones."[386] The difference between *The Watcher* and *Nightmare*, however, was that the latter had an auteur's name to shield it: Burton "protected" his project so that the crew "didn't have to listen to any notes from the studio."[387] This protection is possibly why *Nightmare* came out darker than Disney would have liked it, resulting in a rejection by the Disney brand and a forced escape to Touchstone Pictures.

Criticising this judgment, Henry Selick has accused Disney of having been "utterly wrong" and revealed that, contrary to Disney's fears, children connected to the film once they discovered it. "It wasn't too dark, too scary," the director said. "Kids love to get scared. In fact, I don't think it's too scary at all. Even little, little kids, as young as three, a lot of them love that film and respond well to it."[388] Tim Burton has likewise rejected the idea of his work being too scary for children:

> *I've run up against that ever since I started making movies. [...] adults view it and think it's too weird or dark for children. I've never understood why, because most fantasy and fairytale stuff is based on darker material than this — take Pinocchio, which is really terrifying. I think that people, as they get older, are losing sight of their own childhood and they underestimate children. You know, children are their own critics, their own barometers — if something's too scary for them, they'll leave.[389]*

The real problem, then, was not how *Nightmare* was "going to play with the kiddies" but how it was going to play with their parents, who had come to expect a certain thing from a Disney film — the exact same concern Disney had had in 1980 with *The Watcher in the Woods*. As it turned out, Disney needed not have lost sleep over it. Although it received a PG rating (an unusually high classification

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[386] Sharkley, "Tim Burton's 'Nightmare' Comes True."
[387] Stern, "Henry Selick on Directing 'the Nightmare before Christmas'".
[388] Anon, "The Nightmare before Christmas 3-D: 13 Years and Three Dimensions Later".
[389] Michael Dwyer, "The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of," *The Irish Times*, 10 December 1994.

for animation in this period), *Nightmare* was critically considered to be "fun for the whole Addams family"[390] and "in no way mean-spirited."[391] On the contrary, critics reassured "concerned parents" that "ultimately, things will be put right. [...] Jack and his Halloweentown collection of strange friends are oddly charming [...] [and] Jack (with whom the viewer identifies) is genuinely unaware of his transgressions. If Jack's a bad skeleton, he's an innocently bad skeleton."[392] Occasionally, critics also pointed out the differences between *Nightmare* and the more controversial Burton films: "[Burton's] taste for jokey malevolence is much less troubling here than it was in the live-action world of 'Batman,'"[393] which had raised concerns over its PG-13 rating and been described by other critics as a place "where bad dreams are born"[394] and "a hostile, mean-spirited movie about ugly, evil people, [...] not for kids."[395]

This general change in approach to children and entertainment of a darker tone had already been manifested in the late 1980s, including in relation to children's horror (see chapter 3), suggesting that Disney's relative delay in embracing the trend was a result of an overzealous protection of its brand. However, once there was confirmed approval from audiences, Disney was quick to amend its attitude. In 2001, Jack Skellington was presented as Disney's prodigal son at Disneyland, when the classic Haunted Mansion ride was made over to a *Nightmare Before Christmas* theme for the holiday season, a tradition the parks across the world have maintained to this day. And by the time the digitally-remastered collector's edition of the film came out in 2008, Touchstone Pictures, which had branded the film's previous home entertainment releases (including a special edition in 2000), was no longer involved — *Nightmare Before Christmas* had now been entirely reclaimed by the Disney brand and seen its appeal to pre-teens and families recognised and legitimised.

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[390] Maslin, "Infiltrating the Land of Sugar Plums."
[391] Ibid.
[392] Howe, "'The Nightmare before Christmas' (Pg)."
[393] Maslin, "Infiltrating the Land of Sugar Plums."
[394] Sheila Benson, "Movie Review: Bat Angst in Basic Black," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 June 1989.
[395] Roger Ebert, "Batman," RogerEbert.Com, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/batman-1989.

Notably, however, Disney's change of heart only applied to the film's audience, not to its genre affiliation or perception. Indeed, while Disney's newfound pride in *Nightmare Before Christmas* contributed to the inclusion of children and family audiences, it distanced the film even further from the horror genre. This was because it established a strong tie with the Disney brand of animation, still associated with wholeness, but also because it rebranded *Nightmare* as a Christmas film rather than a Halloween film, a strategy previously employed by other challenging cross-seasonal children's horror films, such as *Gremlins* (see chapter 2).

It should now be more apparent how *Nightmare Before Christmas* reflects an important moment of change for the children's horror trend. In an effort to sidestep controversy, the film became attached to notions of prestige and sophistication, thus drawing in adult audiences over child audiences. When its audience appeal was revised, its connections to horror were softened even further. Thus a new direction for children's horror was outlined: away from children as main audiences and toward a model of parent-approved (and parent-supervised) viewing, under the family label and with few or no obvious ties to horror. In other words, what the 1980s had brought together — children and horror — the early 1990s separated once again.

From children's horror to family horror: *The Witches*, *The Addams Family*

Because *Nightmare Before Christmas* is an animated film, made with a very particular technique and under the strong brand power of Tim Burton and Disney, where much was at stake, it might appear to the reader as an exception rather than the rule in the children's horror timeline. Two other examples will illustrate otherwise. *The Witches* and *The Addams Family* have also sublimated horror out of their narratives and brought themselves closer to the family film genre by captivating adult audiences with notions of sophistication, quality and nostalgia.

In the case of *The Witches*, much like *Nightmare*, the separation from horror occured in terminology and connotation. Instead of referring to the film as part of the horror genre, critics instead chose words related to traditional childhood entertainment and innocence. Pointedly, *The Witches* was described as a "fairy tale,"[396] "no grimmer than the Brothers Grimm, no deeper or richer than Hans Christian Andersen."[397] The fairy tale association also came attached to comments on the educational capacity of the film — "If fairy tales teach coping, then 'Witches' gets a poisoned apple for a job well done"[398] —, as well as the merits of the main character, "a worthy child."[399] Where *Gremlins* provoked fears of corrupted children, *The Witches* only raised confidence in wholesome entertainment, even when its scarier sequences were discussed: "Kids want scaring and 'The Witches' knows how to scare 'em good. But not so much they wake up screaming, and not so little they start going sproing-sproing-sproing in their seats," wrote Desson Howe in his review.[400]

Alongside comments about adult approval, critics also focused on adult enjoyment of this film. "As for grownups," wrote Howe, "'Witches' takes care of them too. In this extended good time of a fairy tale, there's something for everyone."[401] Dave Kehr of the Chicago Tribune felt the same way and described *The Witches* as "a fanciful film for savvy children and a witty, well-made movie for their parents."[402] Much like in *Nightmare Before Christmas*, the film's quality credentials were frequently highlighted: "the most credit," wrote Howe, "should go behind the camera," to Roald Dahl for writing the book, Nicolas Roeg for his "distinctively surreal visual style" and Jim Henson, "the master muppeteer."[403]

The most frequently mentioned element for adult enjoyment of *The Witches* was its perspective and tone. Wilmington wrote of *The Witches* as "the kind of literate, imaginative children's fantasy we see

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[396] Desson Howe, "'The Witches' (Pg)," *The Washington Post* 1990.
[397] Michael Wilmington, "Movie Review: 'Witches': Adult Children's Fantasy," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 August 1990.
[398] Rita Kempley, "'The Witches' (Pg)," *The Washington Post*, 24 August 1990.
[399] Ibid.
[400] Desson Howe, ibid.
[401] Ibid.
[402] Dave Kehr, "A Little Bit of Magic," *Chicago Tribune*, 28 August 1990.
[403] Howe, "'The Witches' (Pg)."

too rarely: the best of its kind since 'Dreamchild' in 1985."[404] The comparison is interesting, as

Dreamchild (Gavin Millar, 1985) would not easily be considered a children's film, despite its PG

rating and despite having been inspired by Lewis Carroll's work, due to the on-going theme of

paedophilia. Wilmington clarified the connection between *The Witches* and *Dreamchild* as one of

mood: "both childlike and knowing, sophisticated and magical"[405] — or, put another way, adult and

nostalgic, as is also suggested by the title of Wilmington's review, "Adult Children's Fantasy." Other

critics also underlined the adult point of view in *The Witches*. Some noted it directly, as Dave Kehr

who commented on Roeg's choice to not adapted the boy's point of view for his retelling of Dahl's

story,[406] others indirectly, like Rita Kempley, who wrote that the main character was "easily as likable

as the kid in 'My Life as a Dog.'"[407] Again, the comparison is telling, as *My Life as a Dog* (Lasse

Hallström, 1985) is not a children's film but a film about childhood from an adult point of view and

specifically a traditional point of view, described by Vincent Canby as "a 1980's variation on the

prettified, idealized, sentimental view of kids favoured by the Hollywood producers who made

fortunes with [...] Shirley Temple."[408]

There is no mention of the horror genre by the critics and there appears to have been an effort on

the part of producers and promoters to avoid it. The poster is cartoon-like and the trailer advertises

a "fascinating new fantasy adventure" while showcasing the film's special effects, its puppets, and its

humorous moments. In addition, the more horrific aspects of the source material were changed in

order to soften the film: in the book, the protagonist is turned into a mouse and remains one for the

rest of his (now drastically shortened) life; in the film, he is changed back into a boy by a reformed

witch, a character who is herself another change, as there are no reformed witches in the universe

of Dahl's story. The result is a film which, albeit containing scary scenes and a dark narrative,

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[404] Wilmington, "Movie Review: 'Witches': Adult Children's Fantasy."
[405] Ibid.
[406] Kehr, "A Little Bit of Magic."
[407] Kempley, "'The Witches' (Pg)."
[408] Vincent Canby, "New Directors/ New Films; Lasse Hallstrom's 'My Life as a Dog,' a Boy's Year," *The New York Times*, 24 March 1987.

conforms to the expectations of a family film by appealing directly to traditional elements such as childhood innocence and a focus on the education and socialisation of children, as well as "quality" and enough layers of meaning to keep both adults and children entertained in the cinema.

The Addams Family exemplifies yet another approach to the same process, this time heavily reliant on nostalgia. For critic Janet Maslin, *The Addams Family* was "a lavish, funny revival,"[409] while Rita Kempley called the film a "resurrection" of Charles Addams' body of work,[410] and Joe Brown, critic for the Washington Post, accused Hollywood of "sending screenwriters into the vaults to exhume baby-boom-era TV shows" and felt that *The Addams Family* was very close in spirit to the sitcom ran by ABC between 1964 and 1966.[411] The baby boom reference is not without significance here: in the 1990s, many baby-boomers would have started their own families and be on the lookout for suitable entertainment for their Millennial children. *The Addams Family* (like *Casper*, which I will discuss in chapter 5) already had a proven track record of quality for these adults, who might even have fond childhood memories of these shows and comics. As Brown put it, the film is "creepy, kooky, even altogether ooky enough to satisfy any Addams addict,"[412] a label more likely to apply to adults than children, as the franchise had been absent from cinema and television throughout the 1980s. Moreover, as the tagline on the poster ("Weird is relative") implies, the film is about a family that is functionally dysfunctional, a topic which may have resonated with the baby-boomers who now found themselves in the family-making stage of their life.

As with the other two examples in this chapter, the technical and artistic quality of *The Addams Family* received numerous mentions, even among the critics who did not rate the film highly. Variety mentioned the "inspired casting" ("Huston is properly ethereal [...] Julia makes a swashbuckling Gomez [...] Ricci is a perfect, somber Wednesday") and the "visual trappings" of this "eagerly

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[409] Janet Maslin, "The Addams Family Those Lovable Ghouls, Revived in High Style," ibid., 22 November 1991.
[410] Rita Kempley, "'The Addams Family' (Pg-13)," *The Washington Post*, 22 November 1991.
[411] Joe Brown, ibid.
[412] Ibid.

awaited" film;[413] and Maslin noted how it "goes well beyond the limits of its original sources, thanks to ingenious casting, droll production design, spirited direction and dazzling camera tricks. It also has a script filled with workable one-liners and a collection of amusing props."[414] The humour and parody were highlighted, and despite abundant direct references to the horror genre and the Gothic tradition in the film itself, horror was seldom mentioned by critics. When it was noted, it was only as the backdrop for parody, allowing the film to be distanced from any potentially challenging content and perceived instead as a "laugh-in-the-dark funhouse ride" featuring "slightly sinister sight gags and Gothic giggles."[415]

Both *The Witches* and *The Addams Family* then complement *Nightmare Before Christmas* in my suggestion of a change in direction for children's horror in the 1990s. Each of these films followed different strategies of legitimisation but all three became associated with adult audiences through elements like artistic and technological quality, sophistication, nostalgia, and the benign and educational aura of fairy tales. These qualities were highlighted in promotional campaigns and noted by critics, enveloping the films in an adult-oriented image to the detriment of the child-centred approach that had ruled in the 1980s. This development is in line with the overall progression of the horror genre in the 1990s, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, pointing toward a renewed sharp separation of children and horror: while the adult-oriented horror films marketed themselves (and were received) as serious horror for adults only, the child-oriented horror films targeted themselves at families (that is, adults as well as children) and actively rejected the horror label. In effect, the children's horror heading no longer suited the features of the early 1990s. Even if some similarities in tone and narrative can still be found between the films of the 1980s and those of the 1990s, the main feature of films in this latter period is their focus on adult audiences and adult sensibilities, therefore making these films very different from what preceded them in the trend and effectively ending children's horror as it had been known up until that point.

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[413] Variety Staff, "Review: 'The Addams Family'," *Variety*, 31 December 1990.
[414] Maslin, "The Addams Family Those Lovable Ghouls, Revived in High Style."
[415] Brown, "'The Addams Family' (Pg-13)."

Conclusion

From the beginning, children's horror was plagued with controversy and struggle over suitability, ratings, the corruption of children and the degradation of the horror genre. At the end of its first decade of life, ceasefire was finally reached — not by the grace of PG-13 (as explored in chapter 3) but as a result of deep internal transformation. Though it began as a hybrid, children's horror matured into a rejection of genre ambiguity, moving away from horror and closer to family entertainment, in yet another renegotiation of genre boundaries.

This adaptation was a response to a growingly inhospitable film culture. Within the horror genre itself, the antagonism was unavoidable as the genre back-lashed against its youth-oriented past and redefined itself as mature, serious and sophisticated. In its coveting of discerning audiences, child viewers lost their value, leaving little room for children's horror to maneuver. This rejection, however, only matches the progression the trend was carving for itself, in efforts to captivate adult audiences (namely concerned parents) and legitimise itself not as horror but as the more socially palatable genres of fairy tale and family film. The clues to this change in direction are in the promotion and reception of children's horror titles of this period: though horror was sometimes referenced, it was vastly overshadowed by other things, such as the features' artistic merit, its technical (and technological) quality, and its educational or benign nature — all of which promoted associations between children's horror and the family film.

This separation between horror and children's horror was deeply significant. Because children's horror now negotiated the expectations of a family audience, its films no longer challenged cultural notions of suitability and childhood. And because children's horror was no longer identified with the hubris of horror in the 1990s, its films no longer raised questions about horror as a genre, its boundaries or its purpose. As the reader will remember from the previous chapters, the questioning

of childhood and of horror had been the cornerstone of the children's horror trend in the 1980s. What became of children's horror when this cornerstone was removed? Initially, the changes were beneficial to all parties: children's horror had been legitimized and horror was no longer challenged; all controversy ceased. To be sure, ratings were still debated and there were still outcries over the state of the film industry but children's horror, that 1980s' troublemaker, was conspicuously absent from these conversations. And, as the films shed more layers of horror and adopted more family traits, the children's horror cycle fell moribund. By the time the millennium turned, a children's horror cinema release was a rare sight, and this is how it has remained (for the most part — see thesis conclusion).

Like a movie monster, however, children's horror refused to die. Indeed, its golden years were still to come — only not on the big screen. The cinema was the birth place of this trend and the stage on which its biggest battles were fought; the challenges to the rating system, the horror genre and childhood all circulated through this series of theatrical releases. But after its separation from mainstream horror, children's horror preference for the cinema was quickly replaced with a favour for other media, namely television and literature. What these two media share that cinema did not offer was a much greater degree of freedom: children's television and children's literature exist in their own cultural space, and although both require a degree of parental approval, supervision is optional. Unlike film stories, which had to please the children as well as the adults accompanying them, television and literature were relatively free from the pressures of adult audiences and thus able to nurture children's horror to new heights, as I will explore in chapter 6. For now, the reader can grasp the extent of the move from cinema to other media by considering Disney's children's horror output of the 1990s and 2000s. For its television channel, the studio produced *Tower of Terror* (1997, D.J. MacHale), *Under Wraps* (Greg Beeman, 1997), *Halloweentown* (Duwayne Dunham, 1998), *Don't Look Under the Bed* (Kenneth Johnson, 1999), *Mom's Got a Date with a Vampire* (Steve Boyum, 2000) *Halloweentown II: Kalabar's Revenge* (Mary Lambert, 2001), *The Scream Team* (Stuart Gillard, 2002), *Halloweentown High* (Mark A.Z. Dippé, 2004) and *Return to*

Halloweentown (David Jackson, 2006). For theatrical release, Disney produced *Hocus Pocus* (Kenny

Ortega, 1993) and *The Haunted Mansion* (Rob Minkoff, 2003), both family films with a humorous

slant.

Non-Disney output reflected the same balance, as television series with a children's horror slant

flourished around the western world — *Round the Twist* (1989, 1993, 2000, 2001), *Are You Afraid of

the Dark?* (1990-2000), *Eerie, Indiana* (1991-1992), *Tales from the Cryptkeeper* (1993-1999), *The

Demon Headmaster* (1996-1998), *Bone Chillers* (1996), *Nightmare Ned* (1997) and *Freaky Stories*

(1997), among others, including the notable *Goosebumps* (1995-1998). Book series likewise

multiplied: *Graveyard School* (Tom B. Stone, 1994-1998), *Shivers* (M.D. Spenser, 1996-1998), *A Series

of Unfortunate Events* (Lemony Snicket, 1999-2006) and the two *Creepers* series (Bill Condon & Rob

Hood, 1996-1997; Edgar J. Hyde, 1998-2010), among many others. Theatrical features, meanwhile,

became sparser and tamer (as *Casper* will illustrate in chapter 5).

In tracking the end of an era for children's horror, this chapter has tied up one of the main threads of

my thesis' overarching argument: the socio-cultural anxieties over children watching horror, and the

implications of that combination for the horror genre, gradually dissipated as the boundaries of

horror were renegotiated and re-established. But the reader will have noticed that there has been

little mention of the other side of my argument, relating to the re-structuring of childhood and the

emerging pre-teen demographic. The three films mentioned in this chapter give clues as to why:

although their target included children and pre-teens, the bigger focus was on the family. This

preoccupation is reflected on audiences, as illustrated by *Nightmare Before Christmas*, but also on

subject matter, as in *The Addams Family*. In this context, childhood appears as nostalgic ideal (the

innocent Jack Skellington) and the children almost as background — Wednesday and Pugsley cannot

exist without the rest of the Addams family, and nine-year-old Luke's physical condition as a child is

forgotten in *The Witches* since he spends most of the film inhabiting the body of a mouse. Indeed,

the increasing presence of the family (and of the adult characters it requires) sometimes appears to

edge children out of children's horror in the 1990s. In the cases that it does not, however, we begin to see hints of a changed perspective on childhood and pre-adolescence. The new concept of the pre-teen, fully integrated within a family context, is the subject of the next chapter. The conclusions of the present chapter will be picked up again in chapter 6, where I will discuss what happened to children's horror after the end of its film cycle.

<u>Chapter Five</u>

The friendly pre-teen: establishing transition, pre-adolescence and family unity in *Casper*

After its schism from the horror genre, the children's horror trend adapted to a family-friendly existence. In accordance to new genre expectations, the violence, gore and terror that had been part of *Gremlins* or *The Gate* was replaced with comedy, and the focus on children was enlarged to include adults. As children and parents were filling the cinema seats and screens, the pre-teen increasingly found himself represented in family films and addressed as part of American family dynamics, in an unassuming and rather understated shift from the previous norm of young child and teenager seen in films of the 1970s and 1980s. As the pre-teen ceased to be a conflicted and challenging notion, the focus of children's horror shifted to the demands of an adult-dominated family audience; that is to say, children's horror titles fell in line with broader expectations of the family film to entertain the children without hurting the sensibilities of their parents. For the most part, this meant adherence to the PG rating and mainstream family values, foregoing the edginess of the 1980s. With the wall between children and horror now partly restored and the pre-teen identified as a *de facto* demographic, how did children's horror navigate concepts of horror and childhood?

The 1990s were a time of acute change — for horror and children's horror, as I explored in the previous chapter, but also for the family film and even the family itself, which was transformed by a drastic paradigm change in western parenting culture. New ideas about the role of the child and the

parent emerged during this period and theories of attachment proved very popular, inspiring the

mainstream child-raising philosophy known as attachment parenting. This practice was described to

American parents by Dr. William Sears in the bestselling *The Baby Book*, first published in 1993. As

the name implies, attachment parenting entirely revolves around physical and emotional proximity

between parent and child. The ideal attachment parent "follows the child's lead"[416] and actively

fosters attachment through practices like extended breastfeeding, "babywearing," bringing the child

into the family bed to sleep and the use of non-authoritarian forms of discipline. The basis of

attachment parenting is the positioning of the child right at the core of family life, a principle that

reshapes not just the child's position but that of the parent, who is envisioned as constant willing

giver as well as constant learner. "Remember," Sears admonished his readers, "your baby is not just

a passive player in the parenting game. Your infant takes an active part in shaping your attitudes."[417]

Babies and children would also shape family life more generally, as illustrated by Sears' description

of the attachment families he observed:

> *Attachment parents also seemed to* enjoy *parenting more; they got closer to their babies*
>
> *sooner. As a result they orchestrated their lifestyle and working schedules to incorporate*
>
> *their baby. Parenting, work, travel, recreation, and social life all revolved around and*
>
> *included baby — because they wanted it that way.*[418]

Indeed, parents of the 1990s were devoted to their children and often engaged in sponsored

activities like family days out or family holidays to child-friendly locations,[419] with a view to enjoy

their parenting and family life. Attachment Parenting International claims that these practices are

"anything but new,"[420] yet Sears realised how strongly they collided with the mainstream parenting

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[416] Attachment parenting International, "Frequently Asked Questions," http://web.archive.org/web/20080317033556/http://www.attachmentparenting.org/faq/general.shtml#what isap.
[417] William Sears; Martha Sears; Robert Sears; James Sears, *The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know About Your Baby -- from Birth to Age Two*, Second Edition ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 11.
[418] Ibid., 17.
[419] Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*, 221.
[420] Attachment parenting International, "Frequently Asked Questions".

philosophies of previous decades, admitting that his recommendations were "rather foreign to the

[...] mind-set we've all been exposed to."[421] To be sure, Sears' ideas were different enough — and

became popular enough — that TIME recently named him "the man who remade motherhood."[422]

This shift in the status and position of the child within the family was not restricted to attachment

parenting philosophy: Taking Children Seriously, a movement founded in 1994,[423] elevated the child

to position it on the same level as the adults in the family, rejecting coercion in favour of "common

preferences."[424] The 1990s also witnessed the rise of a demographic known almost exclusively for its

devotion to children; this was the Soccer Mom, who "[paced] the sidelines of her children's games,

[wearing] T-shirts emblazoned with slogans like 'I don't have a life. My kids play soccer."[425] As

described in the New York Times, "Soccer moms of the 1990's were the 'supermoms' of the 1980's.

Many of them have kicked off their high heels and replaced them with Keds to watch their kids. If

you are a soccer mom, the world according to you is seen through the needs of your children."[426]

Though not every mother was a Soccer Mom or an Attachment parent, families in the 1990s

generally included children centrally in their lives as parents "appreciated children's sense of wonder

and spontaneity and sought to benefit from these qualities."[427]

Family films of the period circulate these attitudes too. As Peter Kramer has pointed out, Hollywood

in the 1990s was notorious for its "obsessive concern [...] with family issues."[428] The family was often

used as ensemble character, as in *The Addams Family* and *The Addams Family Values* or *The*

Flintstones (Brian Levant, 1994), and the films were preoccupied with addressing and restoring

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[421] Sears, *The Baby Book*, 11.
[422] Kate Pickert, "The Man Who Remade Motherhood," Time, http://time.com/606/the-man-who-remade-motherhood/.
[423] Sarah Fitz-Claridge, "How Did Tcs Start?," Taking Children Seriously, http://www.takingchildrenseriously.com/node/48.
[424] "Common Preferences and Non-Coercion," Taking Children Seriously, http://www.takingchildrenseriously.com/common_preferences_and_non_coercion.
[425] Neil MacFarquhar, "What's a Soccer Mom Anyway?," *The New York Times* 1996.
[426] Ibid.
[427] Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*, 164.
[428] Peter Kramer, "Would You Take Your Child to See This Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-Adventure Movie," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Murray Smith Steve Neale (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 294.

balance and unity within the family, particularly in relation to parent—child ties: films like *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid* (Randal Kleiser, 1992), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), *Jingle All the Way* (Brian Levant, 1996), *Jumanji* (Joe Johnston, 1995) and the *Home Alone* series all feature narratives of families brought closer together. Interestingly, what sometimes differs between these narratives is how this balance is restored and where the responsibility is placed. In films like *Mrs. Doubtfire*, where the focus is more adult-driven, the narrative is driven by a parent's love for his children (that is, his family), while films like *Home Alone*, who divide their attention between the adults and the children, tended to also highlight the child's need for the family and his desire to move toward greater appreciation for his parents. As critic Hal Hinson noted, just as Kevin is "underappreciated and misunderstood," "the point of 'Home Alone,' [...] is that Kevin, through his experiences, learns a little bit about self-reliance and appreciation for his family."[429] *Jumanji* similarly places a high level of responsibility on its hero, the child-adult Alan: it is through his adventures in *Jumanji* that Alan learns the importance of demonstrating gratitude and love to his father in order to keep the family together. Alan's lesson sets in motion a chain of prosperity so strong it reaches well beyond his nuclear family and into the community, even preventing the death of another set of parents and the crumbling of that family when Alan persuades the couple to abandon their child-free holiday plans.

The adult-focused family films of the period therefore tend to address parental shortcomings, namely a neglect in prioritising the child, while the more child-focused family films like *Jumanji* and *Home Alone* also identify the child's lack of appreciation for the extent of parental love as a second and equally important reason for family dysfunction in their narratives. But this discourse changed as the decade progressed. The shift is notorious in the *Home Alone* series. *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (Chris Columbus, 1992) continues to present the balancing efforts of Kevin and his family toward mutual appreciation but the same is not true in *Home Alone 3* (Raja Gosnell, 1997). The story focuses on a new child, Alex, and while the film's events lead his family to develop greater appreciation for him and question their lifestyle in order to prioritise him, Alex himself does not

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[429] Hal Hinson, "'Home Alone'," *Washington Post*, 16 November 1990.

undergo significant character growth. The two-way street toward family union that had been established in the first films is thus substituted by a model where the onus is entirely on the adults. Similar messages are found in other films of the late 1990s, such as *Liar Liar* (Tom Shadyac, 1997), in which a father is led by his son to self-improvement and family togetherness, or *Jingle All the Way*, which was received as having a "valuable message" about "the quality of family relationships and the need to make time for the kids."[430]

This shift is subtle but important. As Bazalgette and Stapler have noted, western family films subscribe to a distinctive adult perspective — it is *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (Joe Johnston, 1989) and not Sis, Dad Shrunk Us[431] — but as the 1990s progressed this orientation seemed to develop an ideology similar to the parenting trends of the period, namely a conception of the child as precious[432] and the idea that adults need family closeness just like children, pursued by the most zealous proponents of attachment theory.[433] This focus on the adult faction of family audiences, its wants and needs is tied to another trait of the family films of the 1990s, their nostalgia. I have already addressed this topic briefly in the previous chapter with *The Addams Family*, but there are other notorious examples of familiarity in 1990s' film: the second *Addams* feature (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1993), of course, but also *The Flintstones*, *Richie Rich* (Donald Petrie, 1994) and *Casper,* all of which were based on pre-existing franchises of the 1950s and 1960s. *The Flintstones*, for instance, was described in the Washington Post as a "live-action recycling of the '60s cartoon" and predicted to be "a sure thing: It's fondly familiar to boomers raised on 'Flintstones' reruns and vitamins, and to their kids, helplessly in the path of the hurricane of hype, the hundreds of tie-in toys and products."[434] Though this comment suggested children as powerless, it credited them with

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[430] Edward Guthmann, "Film Review -- Arnie Doesn't Ring Any Comedy Bells / Hokey Holiday Film Doesn't Quite 'Jingle'," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 November 1996.
[431] Staples, "Unshrinking the Kids: Children's Cinema and the Family Film," 96.
[432] Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*.
[433] Ann Hulbert, "All That Parents Can Do Isn't Enough," *The New York Times*, 20 March 1994.
[434] Anon, "'The Flintstones' (Pg)," *The Washington Post*, 27 May 1994.

tremendous consumer influence and, moreover, presented adults as an equally strong force in the family and children's market.

In this adult-dominated climate, where did children's horror fit in? The reader will not be surprised to learn that there were not many examples of children's horror in the 1990s and that this situation declined steadily as the decade progressed, as each title adopted new influences and conventions. The premise of *Home Alone*, for instance, might be horrifying for children but overall the franchise steers clear of childhood fears and, like *Gremlins* and *Nightmare Before Christmas*, heavily relies on the Christmas season to counter its horrors and create an aura of family-friendliness. In the same way, *Jumanji* is close to the heart of children's horror but its child-focus is hijacked by the adult presences of Alan and Sarah. Even if the film continuously affirms their child-likeness and includes two pre-teens in its cast, the narrative's driving force is diametrically opposite to that of previous films in the children's horror trend as it takes Alan back into his childhood rather than forward into adolescence and independence (see chapter three). These films clearly assert the ideal of family unity, of treasuring the child and keeping him close, connecting with both child and adult viewers.

Interestingly, these films also collectively affirm the existence of a clearly separate demographic within childhood that is neither child nor teenager. The children in these features are of a specific age, with a certain look and a distinctive set of interests and characteristics: like Glen and Terry in *The Gate*, Pugsley and Wednesday Addams and Alan and his friends in *Jumanji* are all pre-teens. Though the pre-teen is mentioned by reviewers and critics in relation to children's horror audiences as far back as *The Watcher in the Woods* and *Poltergeist*, his presence is not as visible in the films' actual narratives. On the contrary, most entries in the children's horror trend cast children and teenagers but shy away from young teenagers or pre-teens. A few exceptions apply — Corey Feldman's character in *Gremlins*, the boys in *The Gate* (particularly Terry), and the characters in *Little Monsters* (Richard Alan Greenberg, 1989), who are six-graders —, but for the most part, the pre-teen was an abstract, invisible entity that existed mainly as an ambiguous audience group and, as I

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Filipa Antunes   *"Children beware!"*

have been arguing, a great cause of cultural tension. But in the 1990s, the pre-teen is often present and recognised all throughout the family film genre: he is the "skinny preadolescent boy" in *Beethoven* (Brian Levant, 1992);[435] he is Kevin, home alone and indulging in "some preteen risky business: videos, sundaes and sled rides."[436]

Indeed, it is in this decade that the pre-teen truly became king in children's horror, obliterating representations of younger children and older teenagers in major roles. *Casper* demonstrates this turning point. The film singled out the pre-teen, focused entirely on his age-specific experiences, and cast no young children or teenagers. Moreover, the film's text, its promotion and the attitudes of cast and crew as well as critics paint a completely new picture of the pre-teen: no longer a phantom demographic but a socially-established and culturally-recognisable age group. In line with its contemporary family films, *Casper* also focuses on adults and frames its characters within family dynamics and the quest for harmonious unity. The film's use of Dr. Harvey, father to a pre-teen girl, are a great example of the period's preoccupation with family attachment but also a clear signpost for the new direction children's horror took under the family film umbrella.

In this chapter I will develop these ideas drawing on analyses of aesthetics, representation, tone and ideology, as well as interviews and reviews to point out the pre-teen as a fully established and integrated social group in American culture of the 1990s. I will also complement the previous chapter's suggestion of a partial move away from the horror genre by analysing the different ways horror is used in *Casper*. I will note the ways in which horror was sublimated in the film's aesthetics and narrative and explore the clear parallel established between death and the transition from childhood to adolescence through the pre-teen stage. This chapter will also reflect on the relative end of controversy around children's horror and, particularly, on the implications of the end of this conflict: by virtue of presenting pre-adolescence as an aspirational stage for young children and

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[435] Rita Kempley, "'Beethoven'," *Washington Post*, 3 April 1992.
[436] Jeanne Cooper, "'Home Alone'," ibid., 16 November 1990.

demystifying it for parents, *Casper* effectively sectioned pre-teens out of its audience, marking the end of the children's horror film cycle.

Twelve and transitioning: representing the pre-teen

In its portrayal of childhood, *Casper* limits its representations to Casper and Kat, the two main characters. Though one is dead and the other living, the two are clearly grouped together by two main characteristics, revealing an understanding of childhood more complex than *The Watcher in The Woods* and more precise than *The Gate*. The first characteristic of this group is age. Spielberg, who produced, and Silberling, who directed, estimate Casper and Kat's age at "twelve or thirteen,"[437] while reviewers commented on the "12-year-old"[438] Kat and on Casper, who "lived to be 12."[439] It is interesting that reviewers have pinpointed the children's age so precisely as age is not directly mentioned in the narrative. There must have been something else in the representation of these children that connected with the critics' personal sense of what a twelve-year-old would be — and, conversely, the roots of those details were in the filmmakers' ideas about a twelve-year-old's life.

Thinking back to my arguments in chapter two, the age of twelve is significant because of its position just below an important frontier. Arbitrarily or not, the PG-13 rating highlights a moment of separation between young children and teenagers; a child of twelve is therefore right at the border, fast approaching this unique transition in life. And indeed, the second major characteristic of *Casper*'s children is their overpowering liminality. This is quite literal in the case of Casper, who is in between life and death, but Kat is similarly associated with incomplete or uncomfortable transitions: moving to a new town, a new school, a new family structure after the death of her mother and a

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[437] Brad Silberling, 2008.
[438] Owen Gleiberman, "Casper," in *Entertainment Weekly* (1995).
[439] Caryn James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back," *The New York Times*, 26 May 1995.

newfound interest in boys. Both Casper and Kat are young people straddling childhood and

adolescence.

This ambiguity begins with their appearances. As Roger Ebert noted, Casper has "much in

common"[440] with small children. As described by a number of other critics, the little ghost's

"obsequious and bubble-headed"[441] nature, his "Walter Keane eyes that bat up and down like

Bambi's"[442] and his "baby face and big blue eyes"[443] make Casper look very much like a child — he is

a "fetus-shaped apparition,"[444] "the cuddly, floating baby-head from the next world."[445] The

roundness of his shape and the associations with babyhood continued in comparisons to "the

Pillsbury Doughboy"[446] (Casper could be "the Pillsbury Dough Boy's shy cousin"[447]), and adjectives

such as "lovable,"[448] and "adorable creature."[449] Christina Ricci, who plays Kat, was also described as

"a bit of a baby-head herself."[450] Unlike Casper, however, her "adorably spooked stare"[451] was

usually contrasted with more adult characteristics: her "amazingly mature and nuanced

performance"[452] and the way she "has become eye-catchingly lovely since her days in *The Addams*

Family."[453] For the press and her co-stars alike, Ricci was "fourteen going on thirty"[454] and "never

managed innocence, even in *Casper*."[455]

This combination of child-likeness and adult maturity in the pre-teen bodies of Casper and Kat is

addressed directly in the film's exploration of their budding sexuality. The famous line uttered by

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[440] Roger Ebert, "Casper," RogerEbert.Com, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/casper-1995.
[441] Mick LaSalle, "'Casper' Raises Spirits and Tugs Heartstrings," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 May 1995.
[442] Gleiberman, "Casper."
[443] James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back."
[444] Rita Kempley, "'Casper'," *Washington Post*, 26 May 1995.
[445] Gleiberman, "Casper."
[446] Desson Howe, "'Casper'," *Washington Post*, 26 May 1995.
[447] Gleiberman, "Casper."
[448] James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back."
[449] Ibid.
[450] Gleiberman, "Casper."
[451] Ibid.
[452] James Berardinelli, "Casper (1995)," http://www.imdb.com/reviews/36/3658.html.
[453] Zachary Woodruff, "Casper," http://www.filmvault.com/filmvault/tw/c/casper.html.
[454] "Behind the Scenes," in *Casper*, ed. Brad Silberling (Universal Pictures UK, 2008).
[455] Anon, "Teen Spirit," *Marie Claire*, February 2000.

Casper upon first seeing Kat ("There's a girl in my bed... Yes!") is an example, as is the scene in which Kat and her father discuss her Halloween party costume. In this scene, Dr. Harvey tells Kat she will look cute no matter what she wears, to which Kat responds, frustrated, that "Cute's like when you're nine years old and you've got *papier machê* around your head. I wanna look… nice. Like… like, date-nice." At this, Dr. Harvey is agitated. "Really? Honey… You know, maybe it's time that we sat down…" She laughs. "It's a little late for that, Dad." Dr. Harvey's agitation increases. "How late?" "Oh! Don't worry, not that late." The exchange is humorous but very clear in its suggestion of Kat's transitioning from asexual child to sexual teenager. Kat sets herself apart from the "cute nine-year-olds" but also from sexually-active adults; she is somewhere in the middle, just recently aware of her potential to attract romantic attention as well as her desire to explore the world of dating and boys. And, regardless of Ricci's media persona, Kat's romantic advances and her interactions with boys are displays of very innocent sexuality: being asked out to the Halloween party, sharing a slow dance, a first kiss.

Innocence is also the defining tone of Casper's romantic feelings toward Kat. His puppy love is child-like in its exaggeration, from his cartoonish expressions and inflated romantic sighs to his naive attempts at seduction, such as shape-shifting into a muscular superhero. Casper and Kat's romance is wholly youthful, based not on sexual chemistry but ideas of true love that is rooted on friendship: Kat may be "the love of his life"[456] but Casper remains her "truest friend."[457] As one critic noted, "there is only so much you can do with a relationship between a little girl and a ghost,"[458] and indeed, even if this supernatural romance may seem to parallel *Ghost*, the similarities are limited to a belief in everlasting love ("Can I keep you?" Casper repeatedly asks). Instead of evoking sensuality, the kiss between Casper and Kat "loads on the fairy-tale allusions,"[459] and their coupling, though framed as romance, was read by critics as a close friendship, sometimes compared to that of E.T.

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[456] Howe, "'Casper'."
[457] James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back."
[458] Ebert, "Casper".
[459] James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back."

and Elliot.[460] Reviewers described Casper's longing "to make friends with"[461] Kat, how they "become fast friends,"[462] and how their "friendship"[463] develops until they become "best friends."[464] The film's narrative also appears to encourage this platonic reading, as Casper and Kat seldom engage in physical displays of romantic affection, acting instead as close friends.

Nevertheless, *Casper*'s suggestion of romantic desires in childhood did not escape criticism, with disapproval particularly aimed at the "girl on my bed" line. The issue was raised by Harvey Films, the original owners of the Casper character from back in the 1950s, who felt uncomfortable with the implication of Casper having been a person before becoming a ghost. The notion was especially inappropriate if that person had been an adolescent with a maturing sense of sexuality. For Harvey, it was problematic and undesirable to present audiences with "a very young boy" who had "adolescent yearnings."[465] Referring to the divisive scene, Silberling has confessed that he felt the original Casper to be "a little too soft, a little bit androgynous." In an attempt to correct this, he and Spielberg agreed to "contemporise" Casper by giving him a "truly adolescent reaction to the first girl who's dropping on the springs of his bed." With a touch of topical humour, the filmmaker added another element to his defence: in all these years Casper's been dead, "he's gotta have learned something [from TV]."[466]

It is interesting to note that the filmmakers' intuition of what a boy Casper's age would be like was not challenged by reviewers nor by audiences, who, according to Silberling, "appreciated [the scene]."[467] Harvey's protests therefore feel more like a sign of consummated change in American views than an indication of any form of controversy or challenge. Indeed, *Casper* "doesn't trade on

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[460] LaSalle, "'Casper' Raises Spirits and Tugs Heartstrings."
[461] Ibid.
[462] Ebert, "Casper".
[463] Gleiberman, "Casper."
[464] Berardinelli, "Casper (1995)".
[465] Silberling, "Casper Dvd Commentary."
[466] Ibid.
[467] Ibid.

nostalgia,"[468] as one critic put it. On the contrary, it was completely separated from the concepts of childhood and children circulated in its source material, portraying the twelve-year-old not as an innocent child but as a pre-teen, belonging to a different group of young people experiencing the transition between childhood and adolescence. These changes to adapt *Casper* and the way they resonated with audiences and critics — as well as the way it clashed with Harvey's views — are only evidence that childhood was now perceived differently and that the concept of the pre-teen as a distinct demographic had at last taken root in American culture.

Death and puberty: tailoring horror for the young child

In addition to marking cultural change, *Casper*'s representations reveal a crucial development in the children's horror trend during the 1990s: these films were no longer aimed at pre-teens but at young children. *Casper*'s rating begins to suggest the shift in primary audience goals. Like other children's horror features of the same period, such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Casper* was rated PG — not PG-13 like the majority of the risqué children's horror titles of the late 1980s. The justification for the rating and, indeed, what really solidifies *Casper* as a film for young children is its subject matter and its representational focus on the pre-teen as an aspirational group. This tactic would not conquer actual pre-teens, more likely to be interested in aspirational portrayals of older teenagers, but would be enticing for young children at the cusp of puberty. And, in fact, despite one reviewer's mention of the film's "immense appeal for the preteen crowd,"[469] most critics wrote of watching it in "a theatre packed with 300 happy 8-year-olds"[470] and described *Casper* as "an engaging fantasy for very small children,"[471] a "sweet children's movie,"[472] with "performances for the under-twelve

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[468] James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back."
[469] Berardinelli, "Casper (1995)".
[470] LaSalle, "'Casper' Raises Spirits and Tugs Heartstrings."
[471] James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back."
[472] Ibid.

audience"[473] and an "appeal for small children"[474] so heavy it "offers little to divert anyone over the age of 8."[475]

The way *Casper* uses of horror is in line with a target audience of younger children as the gore of *Gremlins* and the terror of *The Gate* were discarded and replaced by a much softer approach. Silberling still makes abundant use of horror aesthetics and tropes which keep *Casper* in the children's horror trend: several canted angles, exteriors shot at night (often dark and stormy), organ music that fills the screen and villains silhouetted by lightening against the haunted house. The manor in particular ticks all the boxes for horror houses, appearing complete with overgrown garden, old armours and tapestry and plenty of dust and cobwebs. Moreover, *Casper* explicitly references well-know horror figures and titles: the Manor is described as a house good "for Stephen King," and characters include an exorcist priest who "gets the pea soup treatment"[476] and turns his head 180 degrees like Linda Blair in the famous scene, as well as a young teenage couple who plot against Kat in the style of *Carrie.* But clear as these references might be, *Casper* systematically sublimates its horrors in a much more thorough effort than any previous children's horror title: the story takes place in a town called Friendship, where "our friendly villains"[477] consist of "an evil though essentially harmless heiress,"[478] her comic relief assistant, and Casper's "wacky"[479] (or at worse "inhospitable"[480]) uncles who are "the Snow White dwarfs meet Gremlins meet Robin Williams' Genie in Aladdin."[481]

Aesthetically, too, *Casper* removes itself from the horror genre. Whipstaff Manor may be haunted but it resembles a palace out of Arabian Nights with its rounded ceiling tops, a theme that continues

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[473] Berardinelli, "Casper (1995)".
[474] Ebert, "Casper".
[475] Brian Lowry, "Review: 'Casper'," Variety, http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117904082/?categoryid=31&cs=1.
[476] Silberling, "Casper Dvd Commentary."
[477] Ibid.
[478] James, "Friendly and Translucent? He's Back."
[479] Kempley, "'Casper'."
[480] Barbara Shulgasser, "'Casper' the Sappy Spook," *The San Francisco Examiner*, 26 May 1995.
[481] Gleiberman, "Casper."

inside, where it is all rounded angles, bold swirly lines and circular and spiral motifs inspired by Gaudi, in an attempt to emulate "the curves of the Harvey toons."[482] The set is almost entirely dominated by warm colours and though the palette occasionally changes, it never deviates from an aura of comforting friendliness. Casper's playroom, for example, is painted in baby blue, a colour strongly associated with childhood tenderness. The texture of it all, moreover, bears affinity with the constructions in theme park attractions, and its details of excess contribute further to an aura of fantasy instead of terror: the layer of dust that covers every inch of the house even after Dr. Harvey and Kat have lived there for a while, the old-style Victorian decoration, entirely out of place in such an avant-garde house, and the comically over-abundant cobwebs. The line "This looks like Dr. Seuss threw up," (cut out of the film's first edit "for the fairness of young viewers,"[483]) may accurately describe the general feel of *Casper*'s sets — less like a haunted house and more like a Halloween party at Snow White's.

Indeed, fairy tales seem to match *Casper*'s persuasion. Snow White is alluded to directly when Kat finds the ghostly trio's beds and wonders aloud where Dopey and Doc sleep, and so is Pinocchio when an angel grants Casper his wish to be a real boy. Cinderella gets a nod in the ball scene and it was also used as a reference point by Silberling, who has commented how "it really felt like [*Casper*] was a Cinderella story."[484] Similarly, James Horner, who scored the film, has stated that he saw *Casper* "for the modern fairy tale that it was," and revealed that "what they were looking from me was not cartoon music" but that "lost quality of youth or childhood that [Casper] can never recapture," which makes the film "a fairy tale."[485] Compare this with *The Gate*, as an example of what was common in late-1980s children's horror films. While *The Gate* evoked fairy tales only in its happy ending, *Casper* was produced and received as an actual fairy tale, bringing it very much in line with the marketing strategies of other children's horror films of the 1990s (see chapter four).

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[482] Silberling, "Casper Dvd Commentary."
[483] Ibid.
[484] Ibid.
[485] "Behind the Scenes."

One aspect that was singled out by critics, however, was *Casper*'s use of ghosts or, more exactly, its handling of death. In its complaints about the adaptation, Harvey Films had mainly objected Casper's blossoming sexuality but the film's association of its characters with death was also viewed as a problem. The implication of a child having died is quite unpleasant and not a theme Harvey ever thought suitable to be included in its cartoons. As reviewers pointed out, "while Casper's very premise is a macabre one, in the past, fans weren't encouraged to think of him as the noncorporeal remains of a dead child;"[486] rather, Harvey cartoons were "comic and sentimental exercises."[487] The film adaptation, on the other hand, did not shy away from the topic of death, exploring themes of grief and the loss of parents, and tackled Casper's situation in a scene where he remembers and describes his death to Kat. If this change pleased some reviewers, critic Barbara Shulgasser found the script "rather offensively maudlin." Shulglasser expanded:

> *Older [kids] — and adults — will be nauseated by the references to life after death, the ease with which characters move from life to death and back and the general inconsistency of the rules of mortality as applied by the filmmakers. Although we are supposed to empathize with Harvey and Kat for losing a loved one, anyone who has ever mourned such a loss will sputter at the suggestion that people return from the dead to advise the living. Do you really want your children hearing this stuff? It's bad enough that when Harvey accidentally dies, his death is treated with as much cinematic concern as if he'd skinned his knee. His return to life is dispatched with equal nonchalance. But when his dead wife shows up to offer such refreshing motherly advice as, "French fries are not a breakfast food," you may find yourself suppressing the gag response. The movie is downright sappy: Steven Spielberg is the executive producer.[488]*

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[486] Kempley, "'Casper'."
[487] LaSalle, "'Casper' Raises Spirits and Tugs Heartstrings."
[488] Shulgasser, "'Casper' the Sappy Spook."

For this particular reviewer, *Casper*'s take on death was inappropriate in its choice of sentimentality over realism, teaching and encouraging a sort of inappropriate fantasy to children. This criticism was not new in children's horror films, as the reader will remember from the critical response to *The Gate* (see chapter three). Here, as before, this kind of censure is explained by the critic's personal opinions, and her position as an adult not particularly fond of Spielberg's sentimental perspectives. But *Casper*'s use of death is less ideological than it is symbolic: when *Casper* talks about death it is not talking about the end of life at all but the end of childhood. Its depictions of fluid mortality are not a disrespect of the natural laws but an affirmation of the social norms of our culture, namely the liminality of the pre-teen years. *Casper*'s tone, therefore, is directly related to its intended target audience. As Ebert wrote in his review, "It's easy to see why Casper the Friendly Ghost has such an appeal for small children. They have so much in common with him, since they, too, feel invisible and misunderstood and remember little of their earlier lives. He is reassuring; in a universe of scary ghosts, it's nice to know there's one on your side."[489] Another thing young children have in common with Casper (and Kat) is that they are at the cusp of the pre-teen years, struggling with the anticipation and anxiety of this life stage.

At this point, *Casper*'s deliberate association with fairy tales becomes important, particularly if fairy tales and their meanings are understood in the sort of therapeutic way described by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*. The author defended the emotional importance of fairy tales for children, arguing that the dark themes often contained in those stories, such as death and fear, were symbolically interpreted by children to great psychological and social benefit.[490] Bettelheim's work has met considerable criticism,[491] but its foundation is close to the thoughts voiced by Silberling about his feature, particularly the repeated emphasis on "emotional healing"

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[489] Ebert, "Casper".
[490] Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.
[491] See James W. Heisig, "Bruno Bettelheim and the Fairy Tales," *Children's Literature* 6 (1977); Alan Dundes, "Bruno Bettelheim's Uses of Enchantment and Abuses of Scholarship," *The Journal of American Folklore* 104, no. 411 (1991); Jack Zipes, "On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children: Bruno Bettelheim's Moralistic Magic Wand," in *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk & Fairy Tales - Revised and Expanded Edition* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

and its centrality in the film.[492] Indeed, *Casper* directly links its themes of horror, death and liminality (in the form of ghostliness) with pre-adolescence and the specific challenges of this transition, such as physical changes in the body and the awakening of sexual feelings. The film then presents the resolution to the problem, not just in its happy ending but also its soothing tone, achieved through the sublimation of horror and, as Shulglasser pointed out, bending the rules of mortality to suit the narrative.

Casper thus demonstrates a very clear change in form for children's horror. Though childhood and the pre-teen stage was still a core issue in the films of this trend, the treatment of this topic was no longer aimed at children in general but at a very specific group of young children in particular. To reach young children effectively while avoiding controversy required a general softening of the edges: a family rating (PG not PG-13), a soothing tone, sublimated horror, and comedy and family influences.

"My daughter is a teenager!": tailoring the horror family film for parents

As the reader will recall from chapter 3, films like *The Gate* and others of the same period used horror to explore issues specific to children through their perspective, often focusing on the themes of identity and self-confidence. So far, *Casper* has not differed much. But those films also tended to focus on the closeness between siblings (usually the main character and an older teenaged brother or sister), keeping parents out of the narrative or, at least, out of the primary roles. As children's horror moved toward family film territory, however, the parental position became more prominent not just because of concerns over suitability and educational value, as discussed in chapter 4, but because parents were now a legitimate part of the target audience. Children's horror, therefore, suffered a second key transformation: parent—child relationships entirely replaced sibling relationships as core narrative motifs.

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[492] Silberling, "Casper Dvd Commentary."

As discussed earlier, *Casper* links the onset of puberty to a series of fears and anxieties in the child, but puberty does not affect young children alone — just as the child leaves childhood and enters adolescence, so too the parents must let go of their child and welcome their teenager. The "emotional wounds" that concerned Silberling, therefore, do not just apply to Casper and Kat; they extend to their respective families. This much is made clear in the film, once again through the use of death. For all the main characters, death (that is, puberty) is associated with fears about the destruction of parent—child bonds and the dissolution of the family unit.

For Casper, death meant isolation, loneliness and separation from his father; for Kat, it was associated with the fear of abandonment, of forgetting and being forgotten by her family. And the same is true for their parents. After Casper's death, his father spent his life attempting to bring him back to life (or, symbolically, back to childhood from adolescence). Of course this was an impossible pursuit, so at the end of his life, Casper's father remained estranged from his son. Dr. Harvey's approach is equally misguided, albeit with a happy end. After drinking too much in an attempt to forget his dead wife, Dr. Harvey has a fatal accident. Once back as a ghost, he is consumed by his newfound freedom and forgets his daughter. Kat is devastated, and it is only through a teary-eyed demonstration of filial love, affection and closeness that Dr. Harvey is once again reminded of their bond. He is then brought back to life using the technology invented by Casper's father (itself a product of parental love). The treasure of Whipstaff Manor is thus revealed: not gold but love, specifically the love between a parent and their child. The message is powerful for children as well as their parents, reassuring the viewers that, though puberty might bring changes, the family will always remain.

Indeed, there are just as many comforting messages in *Casper* for parents of children about to become pre-teens as there are for the children. In the film's commentary, Silberling has reflected on Dr. Harvey's fear of "not being quite up to speed on what it is to raise a daughter" and his tendency to "panic, as any parent would, about not having the skills to parenting, about not knowing how to

raise a girl, being a guy himself."[493] Although Silberling explicitly points out the gender differences between Dr. Harvey and his daughter, their generational differences are just as significant: he is confused about which words to use with his daughter (Kat wants to "hang" with her friends, not "play"), does not seem to be in tune with his daughter's preoccupations (looking "date-nice," not "cute"), and when he displays his affection by kissing her on the cheek, Kat's response is "I hope no one saw that."

As Howe and Strauss argue, for the boomer parent in the 1990s "family formation and parenthood weren't a social expectation, but a choice, even a profound personal statement. To the current mind-set, nothing is on autopilot. [...] This tension has produced a parental fixation on control."[494] The source of Dr. Harvey's anxieties and feelings of inadequacy is precisely the loss of this control because of the transition at hand. Dr. Harvey may have known how to parent a child but that child is disappearing and so he desperately hangs on to the past, endlessly searching for his dead wife's spirit hoping she might bring him comfort, help and motherly advice from beyond the grave. When it comes, her advice is soothing: Kat is "growing beautifully because of you," she tells him. And she adds, "Don't pick up the extension every time she gets a phone call, french fries are not a breakfast food and don't ask her to wear a t-shirt under her bathing suit." In other words, the key to parenting the new Kat is to allow her to grow up and accept the changes. The film's narrative also suggests something else parents of teenagers-to-be should not do: abandon closeness. When Dr. Harvey becomes a ghost, he regresses into childish and reckless behaviour, forgetting his daughter and letting go of parental duties until Kat re-asserts her need for attachment. The "emotional healing" for parents, then, refers to the acceptance of change and the realisation that the pre-teen years are not a threat to family unity but a moment when filial love is strongest.

This anxiety over unrequited love between invested parents and their children is not circulated only in children's horror, or indeed the rest of the family film genre. Messages of filial love were pervasive

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[493] Ibid.
[494] Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 141.

in Millennial pop culture, particularly from the mid-1990s onward. Of course, values like respect and love toward parents are nothing new in western culture, dating at least as far back as the ten commandments,[495] and are often found in children's media throughout all decades. In the 1980s, children's media already contained very clear exhortations to filial love, as in this message at the end of a *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* episode:

> *Today's story was about love, but a very special kind. It was the love a parent has for a child, and I bet that's the strongest kind of love there is because for one thing, there's just about nothing that can change it, no matter what. Maybe, like Adam's father, your parents find it a little difficult to say, "I love you." Even so, you can be sure they do. Besides, let me ask you something, when was the last time you said "I love you" to them?*[496]

The same message is re-iterated, with slight variations in other episodes of the same series. "Sometimes when your parents punish you, you may think they don't love you," one of them begins. "Well, that isn't true. They don't punish to be mean but to teach you. They'll hope you remember the punishment and not do wrong in the future." The message is completed by another character: "I know [my parental figure] loves me, even if he doesn't say it all the time."[497] But even as He-Man and his friends talked about the truth of a parent's love, and even as Mr. T's songs urged children to treat their mothers right,[498] these messages were not about friendship. In Millennial pop culture, loving your parents meant more than deference, it meant emotional closeness — attachment.

This shift is illustrated in the family films of the 1990s, which took family unit as the ultimate desire for both parents and children, but also very clearly in pop music aimed at youth. In the 1990s pop music embodied "a new teen- (and parent-) friendly style the Times called 'a blend of the 1950s and

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[495] Exodus 20:12

[496] Gwen Wtzler, "Prince Adam No More," in *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (Group W Productions, 1983).

[497] Richard Trueblood, "The Secret of Grayskull,"ibid. (1984).

[498] Jeff Margolis, "Be Somebody... Or Be Somebody's Fool!," (MCA Home Video, 1984).

the millennium,' with nary a trace of angst or vulgarity."[499] It had, moreover, a big dose of family. Often, Millennial pop icons were families themselves, such as Hanson and the Moffats, or openly spoke about their families and the close relationship they enjoyed with their parents, encouraging similar attitudes in their fans.

The clearest example might be the hit song "Mama" by the Spice Girls. The video features the Girls sitting in a circle surrounded by their young fans, in a setting reminiscent of school, as the children enthusiastically repeat the lines "Mama, I love you, Mama, I care/ Mama, I love you, Mama, my friend/ You're my friend." The Backstreet Boys, another successful Millennial pop band, have also released a tribute song to their mothers titled "The Perfect Fan." The song was performed live on the Into the Millennium Tour in 1999 and 2000, where the Boys dedicated it to all the mothers in the audience and were joined on stage by some young fans with their mothers. Britney Spears, also a Millennial icon, frequently spoke of her close relationship with her mother, who she described as her "best friend" in the book the two co-wrote. Britney lamented how she "knew so many girls who used to fight all the time with their moms" and how that made her "so sad." Her hope was that "in sharing our story we'll inspire mothers and daughters to open their hearts to one another."[500] Britney's mother added to this sentiment: "Mothers and daughters aren't always as close as we are, especially during the teenage years. It's a hard time, and there's potential for a lot of misunderstanding. People say there's a generation gap. Well, I don't really believe that." She also added that what she hoped readers took away from the book was "a better understanding of [...] the power of love, faith, and family."[501]

These messages were directed at children but they stood with mainstream messages for parents. Philosophies like that of Attachment Parenting promoted similar friendship links, suggesting that "the ability to read and respond to your baby carries over to the ability to get inside your growing

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[499] Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 242.
[500] Britney Spears and Lynne Spears, *Britney Spears' Heart to Heart* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 10-11.
[501] Ibid., 12-13.

child and see things from his or her point of view. When you truly know your child, parenting is

easier at all ages," wrote Dr. Sears.[502] He later elaborated on the rewards of these efforts: "The

connected child desires to please. [...] Connected kids are easier to discipline."[503] Thus the

repositioning of the parent from the edges of the narrative to its centre in children's horror is a sign

not just of the direction of the family film but also of the general attitudes of the period toward the

family. Whether as a deliberate lifestyle choice or as "natural instinct" reinforced by "unpleasant

memories of their own latchkey childhoods," as Howe and Strauss argue,[504] parents in the mid-1990s

were extremely invested in their children and these preoccupations spread throughout pop culture,

reminding both parents and children of the common goal of the united family — in spite of the

challenges of puberty.

Conclusion

Just like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Casper* appears as a signpost for the end of a cycle: the

cycle of youth-oriented horror films but also the cycle of anxiety around the emergence of the pre-

teen as an age demographic in American society. As I have explored, *Casper* presents its viewers

with a clear representation of the pre-teen as a distinct social group, which is inserted in American

family dynamics. The film uses horror in gentle and playful ways, addressing dual anxieties for its

dual audience: for children, the onset of puberty; for parents, the parenting challenges of this

change; and for both, the fear that the transition might break up the family. Even if some critics

debated the thematic limits of topics like sexuality and death in a children's film, for the most part all

of these things *Casper* did without causing social controversy. *Casper*'s treatment of childhood is at

the tail end of a long transition in children's horror, from very threatening to very comforting:

starting from a view of children as Other (*The Watcher in the Woods*), children and pre-teens are

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[502] Sears, *The Baby Book*, 11.
[503] Ibid., 19.
[504] Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 56.

first represented as threats to social stability (*Gremlins*) and as strange changing beings (*The Gate*) but soon begin to be presented as harmless (*Nightmare Before Christmas*) and ultimately happy people who cherish family values (*Casper*).

When considering this alongside the conclusions of the previous chapter, it is easy to see that the main cultural drive of the children's horror trend no longer existed when *Casper* was produced. By the mid-1990s, delivering horror-flavoured fiction to children was no longer a challenging proposition, and neither was the suggestion of a special demographic in between childhood and adolescence. The dwindling number of children's horror features likewise supports this progression — the less social tension an idea sparks, the less it is debated. *Casper*'s matter-of-fact representation of the pre-teen years as a reality for American families only attests to the normalisation of a new, more segmented, concept of childhood, as well as to the deep roots children's horror had grown in the family film genre.

Therefore, for the purposes of my argument in this thesis, this is a moment of completion: the children's horror film cycle was over. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the cinema landscapes of America were intensely populated with horror narratives aimed at children, films that are historically relevant not just on account of their difference and industrial impact but also the way they addressed changing attitudes toward horror and childhood. To date, this trend has not been repeated in the cinema, nor is it likely to,[505] as the main question it addressed — period-specific changes in the concept of childhood — has reached social resolution. Moreover, the American film industry has developed a crucial obstacle to children's horror, an obstacle which only intensified after the 1990s. Implausible as it might at first seem, this was the PG-13 rating. In a 2011 critique of the classification, Todd Brown, editor of Twitch, declared that "PG-13 has led directly to the end of films specifically tailored to the 10-13 age range. [...] Hollywood doesn't do them at all." Brown's

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[505] See the thesis conclusion for a brief discussion on children's horror echoes.

argument that PG-13 "killed the movies it was meant to save" is not entirely outrageous. As he

explained, the problem stems from where the MPAA set the line:

> [S]ince the PG-13 the movie industry sees children only as those over the age of thirteen and
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> those under the age of thirteen. In both categories it makes the most sense from a business
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> standpoint to target the largest possible audience. This means that if you're setting out to
>
> make a PG-13 movie you want to make one that will appeal to fifteen to seventeen year olds.
>
> [...] And if you're setting out to make a film for children under thirteen it makes sense to
>
> spend the bulk of your money making movies that mom and dad will go to with their children
>
> and that means aiming young. [...] The problem here is that kids aged ten to thirteen are
>
> nothing at all like seven year olds or fifteen year olds and they're getting cut out entirely.[506]

Similar accusations were voiced by Garin Pirnia in a recent feature for The Atlantic. For the critic, PG-

13 "marginalized audiences aged 12 and under," resulting in today's lack of family and youth-

oriented films: "Since around 2001 (the advent of Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings franchises),

films targeting youth audiences have been either blockbusters or animated films, with hardly

anything in between." Pirnia contrasted the current state of the art with the panorama of 1985,

which he dubbed "the last great year in film for kids and young adults," and outlined a very precise

period as the golden years of youth-oriented cinema: beginning with *Gremlins* and *Temple of Doom*,

peaking the year after PG-13's creation and then steadily declining, "leaving the genre almost dead

by the end of the decade."[507]

Nowhere does Pirnia mention children's horror, but his timeline for this golden period is strikingly

similar to the lifespan of the trend I have been exploring. Indeed, the industrial situation decried by

Pirnia and Brown is visible in the turn taken by children's horror in the 1990s: after a surge of energy

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[506] Todd Brown, "How the Pg-13 Killed the Films It Was Meant to Save," Twitch, http://twitchfilm.com/2011/03/how-the-pg-13-killed-the-films-it-was-meant-to-save.html.
[507] Garin Pirnia, "1985: The Last Great Year in Film for Kids and Young Adults," http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/03/why-the-1980s-is-the-last-great-decade-in-youth-films/385295/.

provided by the new liberties of PG-13, the films quickly deviated from their focus on children to include adult audiences, be they film aficionados or concerned parents. As both Pirnia and Brown identified, there is a certain tragic irony here. PG-13 was introduced as a response to the growing realisation that young people under seventeen were not all the same, that pre-teens were their own distinct demographic. Yet, this rating's existence seems to have pushed the film industry back to a similar culture of homogenization, starting almost immediately after PG-13's introduction.

These thoughts will be picked up again in the thesis conclusion, where I discuss some of the recent children's horror echoes; for now, however, it is more useful to continue chronologically, especially as the extinction of the children's horror cycle had an impact in the overall development of children's horror as a trend more broadly. Indeed, even if *Casper* had been critically unchallenging, it did touch on an important social, cultural and emotional issue: the onset of puberty. Though this topic did not spark as much debate as the pre-teen had previously, it did highlight the existence of a never-ending focus of tension and anxiety, for as long as there are children growing, puberty will, at one point or another, be a challenge to them. It was not a coincidence that all children's horror titles of the 1990s had been rated PG and not PG-13 — this was the audience that would most identify with the anxiety of imminent puberty.

As children's horror adopted this new theme and this new audience, and particularly given the changes in cinema regulations and expectations, other media became enticing: young adult literature was free from the demands of adult readers and, moreover, of budget and rating concerns; and children's television was blossoming, as youth-oriented television channels such as Nickelodeon and Fox Kids made "Saturday mornings" available all week and all day long, bypassing the family audiences and delivering their contents directly to children in the comfort of their home, with no need for parental approval or supervision. With these three ingredients — new theme, new audience, new media — a new incarnation of children's horror developed, both indebted to and detached from the film cycle that I have so far discussed. My analysis would not be complete

without a look in this direction and a word on its implications on cinema as a medium, and so that is where I am heading for the final chapter of this thesis.

<u>Chapter Six</u>

"Children beware… you're in for a scare!"

Goosebumps **and the horrors of puberty**

The children's horror trend may have disappeared from America's cinemas in the mid-1990s but its cultural presence did not. As child-oriented horror features dwindled, young adult literature and children's television produced title after title, achieving such levels of popularity they marked a generation. In these media, children's horror took shape not as a period-specific cycle or trend but as something much more enduring, remaining commercially viable, uncontroversial and relatively unchanged from the mid-1990s to the present day. What was this new form of children's horror and how did it relate to the cinematic trend of 1980-1995?

Children's literature has always been rich with horror themes, from fairy tales and nursery rhymes to the penny dreadful novels and comic books, and has not been strangers with controversy for that very reason.[508] Similarly to the cinema, however, there seems to be a shift in the 1980s and 1990s. A good example to begin with is the British Ladybird Horror Classics series, which consisted of illustrated retellings of classic horror literature such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, accompanied by dramatisations on cassette. The books were first published in 1984, with further editions throughout the 1980s and a re-issue in 1997 with new covers — this thesis' reader will notice not only the reputable publisher but also the coincidence between these dates and the key moments of the children's horror timeline. Other examples illustrate the same thing,

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[508] Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock*.

such as Alvin Schartz' famous *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, a popular series of three illustrated

books (and audiobooks) of adapted folklore and urban myths, first published in 1981, 1984 and

1991. Schartz wrote other collections of scary stories for children based on popular mythology and

horror retellings, among them *In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories*, published as part of

HarperCollins' "I Can Read!" series in 1984. *Short & Shivery* by Robert D. San Souci was another very

popular series of retellings and adaptations, which ran between 1987 and 1998. But not all horror

titles for children of this period were retellings and many authors focused on original fiction, like

Betty Ren Wright (*A Ghost in the House*, first published in 1991 and reprint in 1995, and others) or

Mary Downing Hahn, who wrote *Wait Till Helen Comes* (1986), winner of the Young Reader's Choice

Award and other prizes, and *The Doll in the Garden* (1989), also a repeat award-winner, among many

others.

The examples of children's horror literature during the 1980s and 1990s are many and it would be

impossible to list them exhaustively, particularly as many popular series spawned dozens of

individual titles. A selection of significant examples includes: *Tales for the Midnight Hour* by J.B.

Stamper, published in 1977 and followed by sequels in 1987, 1989, 1991 and 2005; *Scary Stories for*

Sleep-overs, by R.C. Welch (1991) and its nine follow-up collections by Q.L. Pearce and other authors

(1992-1999), plus the spin-off series of three novels by Allen B. Ury (*The Living Ghost*, 1996; *Lost in*

Horror Valley, 1996; *Tomb of Eternity*, 1997), as well as the associated series of four volumes, *Scary*

Mysteries for Sleep-overs, published in 1996 and 1997; *Haunted Kids*, a series of non-fiction ghost

stories published between 1993 and 1997 (and republished in the 2000s); the series *Shivers* (M.D.

Spencer, 1996-1998) and C*reepers* (Edgar J. Hyde, 1998-2009), as well as *Bruce Coville's Book of...*

series (*Monsters: Tales to Give You the Creeps*, *Aliens: Tales to Warp Your Mind*, *Ghosts: Tales to*

Haunt You, *Nightmares: Tales to Make You Scream*, *Spine Tinglers: Tales to Make You Shiver*, *Magic:*

Tales to Cast a Spell on You, and the sequels to each one), published between 1993 and 1997. In

children's television the panorama was similar, particularly during the 1990s: *Are You Afraid of the*

Dark? (YTV, 1990-2000), *Eerie, Indiana* (NBC, 1991-1993) and *Eerie, Indiana: The Other Dimension*

(Fox Kids, 1998), *Aaahh!!! Real Monsters* (Nickelodeon, 1994-1997), *Tales From the Cryptkeeper*

(ABC, 1993-1994) and *New Tales From the Cryptkeeper* (CBS, 1997), *Courage, the Cowardly Dog*

(Cartoon Network, 1999-2002) and others.

Among this richness in the children's horror landscape in literature and television, one title stands

out above all others: *Goosebumps* by R.L. Stine. The "absurdly successful"[509] franchise began in 1992,

when *Welcome to Dead House* was published as the first novel in a projected series of six. It arrived

on the market modestly, with no promotional strategy, no pre-release hype and no initial success

either. *Dead House* and the next three *Goosebumps* titles sat on bookstore shelves unwanted for six

months, despite being penned by R.L. Stine, an author already well-known for his other horror

series, *Fear Street*, aimed at an older audience of teenagers. Then, seemingly out of the blue,

Goosebumps became one of the biggest icons of 1990s' children's culture, described as a

"generational touchstone" in The Wire[510] and recently named one of the "cultural artifacts that

induce Proustian flashbacks in millennials" in Newsweek.[511] *Goosebumps* sold over 300 million books

and was translated into 32 languages,[512] becoming so popular it was awarded the Guinness record

for best-selling children's book series of all-time in 2003, with Stine receiving a second record award

in 2011 for most prolific author of children's horror fiction novels.[513] Critics and the press dubbed

R.L. Stine "the Enid Blyton *de nous jours*"[514] and "Stephen King for children,"[515] though he is in

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[509] James Parker, "Horror for Kids - How Goosebumps Outlasted Harry Potter by Terrifying Fourth-Graders and Mocking Their Parents," The Atlantic, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/03/horror-for-kids/308885/.

[510] Jen Doll, "R.L. Stine Has Been Giving Us Goosebumps for 20 Years," The Wire, http://www.thewire.com/entertainment/2012/07/rl-stine-has-been-giving-us-goosebumps-20-years/54789/.

[511] Marlow Stern, "'Goosebumops' Creator R.L. Stine on 20th-Anniversary Series," Newsweek, http://www.newsweek.com/goosebumps-creator-rl-stine-20th-anniversary-series-65631.

[512] Doll, "R.L. Stine Has Been Giving Us Goosebumps for 20 Years".

[513] Horrornews.net, "Rl Stine Receives Honors in Guinness World Records," HNN, http://horrornews.net/35191/rl-stine-receives-honors-in-guinness-world-records/.

[514] A. Billen, "Little Shocks for Horrors," *The Observer*, 25 February 1996.

[515] Joyce M. Rosenberg, "Goosebumps: So Successful They're Scary," *Lawrence Journal-World*, 27 October 1996.

reality a better-selling writer than King,[516] counting in his sales history feats such as authoring nearly

all of the top 20 best-selling paperback children's books in 1995 and 1996.[517]

As the books flew off the shelves, *Goosebumps* soon became more than just a paperback series. "I

saw a group of five or six kids sitting on the floor, with their noses glued in these books," said

Margaret Loesch, then-president of the Fox Children's Network, "and not only that, but they were

passing them around, asking each other if they'd read this one or that one. And even more

interesting, it was a mixed group, boys and girls, which is rare."[518] As a result of this encounter,

Goosebumps expanded to television (YTV/ FOX Kids, 1995-1998) in a series of adaptations that

occupied the slot previously held by *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, which at the time was "by far

the highest-rated children's program on television."[519] If the paperbacks had been "staples of fourth

graders' backpacks,"[520] soon the franchise grew so large that the backpacks themselves were

branded with the *Goosebumps* logo. The market overflowed with *Goosebumps* collectibles, toys,

board games and video games, stationary, party goods, posters, costumes, bedding and apparel

from baseball caps to sneakers, plus the VHS releases of the television episodes and their re-issued

tie-in books. There was also a Disney theme park attraction and special campaigns with popular food

and drink companies, among them Pepsi, Taco Bell, Frito-Lay, Hershey Chocolate, General Mills and

KFC.

The series also earned some arguably less prestigious honours, entering the list of most challenged

books of the 1990s.[521] *Goosebumps* stories can indeed be perceived as more horrific than many of

the children's horror films discussed in this thesis, as they contain violence, gore and slime and are

populated by many dead children. Nevertheless, and despite the challenges and petitions for book

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[516] Mary B. W. Tabor, "Hints of Horror, Shouts of Protest," *The New York Times*, 2 April 1997.
[517] Ibid.
[518] Lawrie Mifflin, "Spotlight; Something Creepy This Way Comes," ibid., 22 October 1995.
[519] "The Media Business; Fox to Morph 'Power Rangers' into 'Goosebumps' Every Friday," *The New York Times*, 8 May 1995.
[520] Mary B. W. Tabor, "Hints of Horror, Shouts of Protest," ibid., 2 April 1997.
[521] American Library Association;, "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 1990-1999," http://www.ala.org/bbooks/100-most-frequently-challenged-books-1990%E2%80%931999.

banning, *Goosebumps* did not in any way reach the levels of controversy explored previously; on the contrary, it cultivated a reputation as harmless fun. In this chapter I will propose *Goosebumps* as a landmark of the cultural assimilation of children's horror as it was the first text of its kind to achieve mainstream success and remain relatively uncontroversial. Unlike its theatrical predecessors, *Goosebumps* did not challenge notions of childhood, nor did it defy genre boundaries, and neither did it debate the existence of the pre-teen demographic. Instead, it worked from an assumption of its unquestionable existence, presenting horror without ambivalence or sublimation and in the process highlighting the major anxieties of this demographic, namely the on-set of puberty and the pains and pleasures it represents for the child about to face it. Through these characteristics and its mainstream appeal, *Goosebumps* appears in the children's horror timeline as an amalgamation of all the previous negotiations in the children's horror trend.

In this analysis, I will first position *Goosebumps* in the context of the children's horror trend, explaining its popularity as the result of a long cultural struggle regarding children and horror, previously articulated in the cinema. Next, I will analyse the series' choice of media formats (paperbacks and television exclusively) and, supported by press coverage, interviews and comparison to other child favourites of the period, will relate these marketing decisions to the new set of attitudes toward childhood that had emerged in America in the 1980s. In the last section, I will turn to the series' contents, often accused of being formulaic by critics, readers and scholars alike, to suggest puberty as the series' main theme and connect its uses of horror to the specificities of its pre-teen audience and, consequently, of the period. The chapter will conclude with a brief analysis of the direction of children's horror after *Goosebumps*.

In media res: *Goosebumps* and the children's horror trend

When R.L. Stine speaks about his career in interview there is often the implication that he does not quite understand his success. His self-professed amazement at his popularity with children[522] can easily be dismissed as modesty, real or feigned, but there is a palpable sense of alienation as Stine positions himself as his own career's cynic. "It was never my idea," the author has revealed about the beginning of his career as a horror writer. "An editor said, 'I need a scary novel for teenagers. Go write a book called *Blind Date*.' She even gave me the title." Stine did not believe in this project but "was at that point in [his] career where you don't say no to anything [...] and it was a No. 1 bestseller in *Publishers Weekly*. I'd been writing 20 years and had never been on that list. I'd struck a chord with kids."[523] In spite of this success, the idea for the next project, *Fear Street*, did not come from Stine either: an editor "suggested that I write a teen horror series — and I said it was a bad idea."[524] Sales proved the opposite but still, when the opportunity arose to write a new series aimed at younger children, Stine was sceptic — he "thought it was a bad idea to compete with *Fear Street.*"[525] In Stine's own words, "the real truth" is that "like most everything I've ever done in my career, I wrote [*Goosebumps*] because someone asked me to."[526] And the trend continued: when he decided he was finished with the series and ready to move on to something else, the letters from children requesting more books made Stine reconsider, resulting in the launch of the *Goosebumps 2000* series, and more to follow it.[527]

It is curious how Stine found himself at the epicentre of a cultural trend seemingly by accident, but the more interesting question about his career is why he received the requests he did. My reading is

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[522] Reuters, "R L Stine Scares Boys and Girls, but Just a Bit and with Humour," http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/18/108/49355/Books/World/R-L-Stine-scares-boys-and-girls,-but-just-a-bit-an.aspx.

[523] Diane Brady, "R.L. Stine on Writing Horror for Grown-Ups," http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2012-11-01/r-dot-l-dot-stine-on-writing-horror-for-grown-ups.

[524] Linda Hall, "Interview with R.L Stine," Hamilton News, http://www.nzherald.co.nz/hamilton-news/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=1503360&objectid=11078381.

[525] Ibid.

[526] Ibid.

[527] Jeff Theodore, "Kids Coax "Goosebumps" Author into New Books," *The Seattle Times*, 5 May 2008.

that the triumph of the *Goosebumps* franchise was the legacy of the children's horror film cycle.

Though G*oosebumps* appeared to materialise out of very little in the cultural scene of the 1990s, its

position is actually *in media res*. Some credit the start of the children's horror literature

phenomenon to Christopher Pike's *Slumber Party*, published in 1985,[528] but the more accurate

beginning might actually be in children's horror cinema roots, in the cycle that I have charted in

previous chapters. Without the cultural prominence of the films of the 1980s and the events that

accompanied them — social controversy over horror, cultural struggles over childhood and the pre-

teen demographic, the introduction of the PG-13 rating —, Stine's editors might not have found they

"needed" teen horror stories nor realised that the pre-teen group was an even more profitable

demographic for this sort of fiction. Notably, even Christopher Pike's books and the other key titles

in children's horror literature were published only after the introduction of PG-13 and the shift in

attitudes it signals.[529] In other words, *Goosebumps* and other children's horror fiction of this period

are not an isolated trend in themselves, even if they stand out in the history of children's literature.

Rather, they continue the negotiation between childhood and horror started in the children's horror

trend and are part of the same wave of cultural and social change.

Stine does not reference social changes as the reason for the success of his books, but the way he

talks about children and horror is in line with these attitude shifts. Addressing the negative reactions

to his work, Stine has said that "People who say kids are going to be influenced [by horror] don't

realize kids are very smart; It's insulting to kids." The author commented: "I'm always in favour of

good violent things. I think violence is good for kids [...] It gets it out. [...] People who go after violent

things for kids just don't like kids."[530] These remarks suggest an elevation of children as discerning

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[528] David Hill, "Who's Afraid of R.L. Stine," Education Week, http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/1996/03/01/06stine.h07.html.

[529] The very few exceptions to this rule, such as Alvin Schwartz's first *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (1981), tend to be horror retellings and folklore tales rather than horror stories set in a modern context featuring children as main characters (the "formula" of children's horror fiction in the late 1980s and, especially, the 1990s).

[530] Jen Doll, "R.L. Stine: The Lost Interview," The Village Voice, http://www.villagevoice.com/news/rl-stine-the-lost-interview-6714409.

and proper audiences of horror, and are evocative of Ebert's comments on Spielberg and the youth-oriented films of the 1980s. These films, Ebert wrote, walk "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 is congratulating them on their ability to take the heavy-duty stuff."[531] That a critic would remark on it suggests the novelty of this kind of approach in the 1980s, and, indeed, as the controversies around *Gremlins* and its rating showed, decisions about children's entertainment tended to be made not on the preferences of children but on the principles of adults.

Furthermore, as *The Gate* illustrated, texts promoting child empowerment were not always welcome — Hollywood's "kids know best" attitude was the cause of America's decline, according to critic Medved.[532] But as the 1990s unfolded, this attitude became a vital ingredient for success. *Goosebumps* is in many regards more "heavy duty" than *Gremlins* ever was: there are many dead children in these stories, the protagonists typically face a threat of physical harm or abandonment, and they often cause death to the things that chase them, even when they are human-like. *Goosebumps* is also more congratulatory of its audiences' capabilities, as it directly addresses children (and only children) with narratives that exist exclusively in the context of ordinary contemporary childhood. Stine's attitude, moreover, is that "kids themselves are the best judge of when they are ready [for scary books]."[533]

These views were not exclusive to *Goosebumps,* they were shared by other children's favourites of the 1990s, such as Nickelodeon. According to Geraldine Laybourne, Nickelodeon used to have a reputation for being a "goody two-shoes, baby network," on account of the "conventional thinking" behind the brand and its inclination to "tell kids what to do."[534] When Laybourne's team took over, their attitude was summarised as opposition to what had been done before: "A lot of television has

[531] Ebert, "The Goonies."
[532] Medved, *Hollywood Versus America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*.
[533] R.L. Stine, "A Chat with the Best-Selling Children's Author," CNN.com, http://edition.cnn.com/COMMUNITY/transcripts/stine.html.
[534] Heather Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only Tv Channel for Kids* (New York; London: New York University, 2004), 135-36.

a low view of its audience," Laybourne commented, "but we didn't think we could get anything by

with kids."[535] A similar approach was used by Scholastic, who built the *Goosebumps* brand with

extreme attention to the preferences and needs of their target audience, not just by keeping their

merchandise relevant (games, school material, etc.) but also by respecting the strict boundaries of

their goal demographic: "Once that fifth-grader goes to school assembly and sees a kindergartner in

a *Goosebumps* shirt, it's all over," the director of brand management for *Goosebumps* has said,

explaining why the under-seven group was never targeted.[536] Nickelodeon and R.L. Stine's views of

children as empowered and discerning audiences, as well as Scholastic's awareness of the pre-teen

group as its own separate demographic, are a direct result of social changes in childhood, thus

connecting them to the children's horror trend and the struggles it negotiated.

Another link between the children's horror film cycle and *Goosebumps* is the balancing of horror

themes and parental worries. As a consumable, *Goosebumps* never left the children's culture

domain and never crossed into the adult sphere; the entirety of its promotional efforts was targeted

at children and emphasised thrills and scary fun ("The all-new, all-terrifying series from the master of

fright!" read the covers of *Goosebumps HorrorLand* books). The idea of the series, however, and

especially its literary quality and educational potential was of great interest to parents and teachers,

and the way the *Goosebumps* brand placated these anxieties was very reminiscent of the previous

negotiations in children's horror that I explored in chapters four and five.

Scholastic's descriptions of the series for parents begin to unveil the strategy: "the beloved classic

thriller series where kids triumph over evil;" "spooky (and funny!) tales."[537] These summaries are not

necessarily accurate to the books' content. Children do not always triumph in Stine's books, and

humour is not as pervasive as this marketing suggests, existing not in the narrative events

themselves but mainly in the form of jokes told by the characters and some of the villains, or in small

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[535] Ibid., 137.
[536] I. Jeanne Dugan, "Goosebumps:The Things That Ate the Kids' Market," Bloomberg Business, http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/stories/1996-11-03/goosebumps-the-thing-that-ate-the-kids-market.
[537] Scholastic, "Parent Guide to Goosebumps."

details of the books, such as the titles (*It Came From Beneath the Sink!*) or the tag lines on the covers

("It's warm! It's breathing! And it doesn't do the dishes!"). The portrayal of the series as not-entirely-

horror, however, is consistent, particularly in Stine's interviews. "You don't want kids to think this is

true," the author has said. "I try to make sure they know it's all crazy and silly."[538] Stine also

frequently emphasised his disbelief in horror and fear in general, claiming that horror makes him

laugh.[539] As with Tim Burton's claims of the same attitude (see chapter four), the suggestion is not

only that he does not take his scary books seriously but also that his intentions in writing them are

not malicious. "I never intended to be scary; I only wanted to be funny," Stine has said.[540] The author

has also expressed disapproval of the more extreme and violent iterations of horror — "I hate

slashing. I hate the torture kind of horror films" —, preferring the ones "that have a good surprise"

and are "clever."[541]

But in spite of these efforts to create a friendly reputation for parents, *Goosebumps* made its way

into the list of most challenged books of the 1990s. And as school districts across the United States

held hearings to decide whether to keep *Goosebumps* in school libraries, it quickly became apparent

that what was at stake was not so much the books' shock value but their place in children's

education. As discussed by Peter Stearns in his study of modern parenting, attitudes toward

children's leisure had changed in the 1990s: "at its best, [play] was taking a number of new functions

that were in fact extremely serious. [...] appropriate play was now a vital component of preparation

for and success in school."[542] Reading was an even greater source of anxiety, as other media

competed for the child's attention and time.[543] So when critics dubbed R.L. Stine "a literary training

bra for Stephen King,"[544] the comparison was heavy with anxieties over the future of children, their

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[538] Doll, "R.L. Stine: The Lost Interview".
[539] Ibid.
[540] Ibid.
[541] Peter Gutierrez, "The R.L. Stine Interview, Part 3: Kids and Horror," School Library Journal, http://blogs.slj.com/connect-the-pop/2012/07/transliteracy/the-r-l-stine-interview-part-3-kids-and-horror/.
[542] Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*, 173.
[543] Ibid., 174.
[544] Rosenberg, "Goosebumps: So Successful They're Scary."

literacy and education. "These books do absolutely nothing to edify our children, or to promote decent morals, or kindness to one another," said a parent in a letter to her school district, defending a ban on the books,[545] while another argued that *Goosebumps* did not meet "district values for educational value" and said she was "amazed and appaled that the only way [parents] can get [children] to read [is to] let them read this type of garbage."[546]

Nevertheless, these were isolated complaints. As part of its branding, Scholastic highlighted the educational potential of the *Goosebumps* series with the ever-present slogan "Reading is a scream!" And, for the most part, this potential as motivation for reading overshadowed the challenges and dominated arguments in favour of keeping the series accessible to children. Indeed, it was a slogan repeated by even the most reluctant school principals, teachers and librarians: some counted *Goosebumps* as "good books to get started with," others did not exclude them but encouraged children to "read other genres and more 'quality literature,'" while others still opposed bans but limited children's reading of *Goosebumps* to "a brief period on Fridays" or classified it as strictly recreational reading.[547] Effectively, *Goosebumps* never reached the levels of opposition of the likes of *Gremlins*. Many schools voted to keep the books available in their libraries and some even used them in the classroom,[548] and as the series remained popular the challenges died out. It is significant to point out these connections with the children's horror film cycle as *Goosebumps* seems to have picked up right where the films left off, becoming the first mainstream articulation of children's horror to frame itself within the boundaries of new American attitudes toward childhood demographics and new concepts of suitability.

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[545] Tabor, "Hints of Horror, Shouts of Protest."

[546] Ibid.

[547] Ibid.

[548] Peter Gutierrez, "The R.L. Stine Interview, Part 2: The Value of Series Fiction," School Library Journal, http://blogs.slj.com/connect-the-pop/2012/07/english/the-r-l-stine-interview-part-2-the-value-of-series-fiction/.

Adults keep out!: repositioning children's horror outside the cinema

As scholar Timothy Morris pointed out, in the 1990s the popularity and strong branding of

Goosebumps "threatened to turn [it] from a series into a lifestyle.[549] This "threat" was the whole

point of the brand, as a statement on the creative direction of the franchise suggests: "We want to

move away from focusing on characters and create a *Goosebumps* environment."[550] The way this

was accomplished included flooding the market with merchandise and promotional tie-ins as well as

expanding from paperbacks to other formats. Here, what stands out is what was left out: there were

no special collector editions of the books, hardcover special or lengthened novels, there were no box

sets of the show's seasons, nor was there a theatrical feature. Cinema's omission in particular is

intriguing given children's horror predecessors, and this and other format choices reveal the impact

of the children's horror film cycle and its negotiations.

Plans for a film were laid early on in the *Goosebumps* timeline, but the idea was never concretised

because producers "never had the right idea."[551] Another reason why a *Goosebumps* movie may not

have thrived in the 1990s was the declining state of the children's horror film cycle at that point in

time. This suggestion gains strength particularly when one considers that the contents of a

Goosebumps book are much closer to *The Gate* than they are to *Casper*. Scholastic might have

succeeded in deflecting anxieties over the books with its reader-friendly campaign but would the

same approach work for a theatrical adaptation? And what audience would this film court? The

tendency was for youth-oriented horror films to include a layer for parents in the audience but how

could *Goosebumps* achieve this without changing the core of R.L. Stine's stories, where adult

presence is very limited? Moreover, would such a move betray the pre-teen audience, who had so

far been the exclusive target?

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[549] Morris, *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film*, 66.
[550] Mariam Mesbah, "New Scarier Goosebumps Products Target Boys," Kidscreen,
http://kidscreen.com/1997/08/01/16023-19970801/#ixzz2Q4ZBFxYq.
[551] Meredith Woerner, "Goosebumps Filmmakers Reveal How Rl Stine Became the Star of Their Movie," io9,
http://io9.com/goosebumps-filmmakers-reveal-how-rl-stine-became-the-st-1700671432.

An audiovisual adaptation of the books was far from impossible, however, as the television series

proved, suggesting that the deciding factor was not a question of adaptation but the hospitality of

the medium, in this case television. Children's television in the 1990s was in a process of transition,

no longer confined to Saturday mornings but still mostly existing in the form of weekday afternoon

and weekend block or dedicated cable channels. However, even if child viewers had schedule

restrictions, they also had autonomy. A trip to the cinema required money, possibly a chaperone and

always included the possibility of age-based restrictions for certain contents. Television, on the other

hand, was not only at the child's disposal in the family living room or even their own bedroom but it

was also often recognized as a child-exclusive space. Particularly on Saturday mornings, early

afternoons or other times of the day when adults are likely to be at work or otherwise occupied, the

television and its surrounding space becomes an adult-free, child-dominated zone. Additionally, this

situation could be entirely parent-approved: "When they were six and seven they discovered the

Saturday morning cartoons. [...] I can't deny that this was great for us, because we'd be able to lie in

bed nice and late while they watched their programs."[552]

Television's child-friendly characteristics were complemented further by its quality as a horror-

friendly space in the 1990s. As described in chapter four, the mainstream horror films of the decade

rebelled against the monster and gore trends of the 1980s, focusing on intellectual and adult-

oriented fiction, thus generating a clear distinction between the contents found in feature films and

those found in television. As cinema became a vehicle for prestige horror, the lower pressure

environment of television became an inviting outlet for the other kinds of horror fiction, from the

eerie mysteries of *The X-Files* to teenaged vampire slayers and their assorted monster friends —

and, of course, *Goosebumps*. The link between television viewing, children's culture and horror is

also made clear within *Goosebumps* itself, as the characters watch late night monster movie

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[552] Marie Winn, *The Plug-in Drug: Television, Computers, and Family Life* (New York; london: Penguin, 2002), 200.

marathons on television at each other's house, browse the horror section at the video store, or suggest that their little sister "re-enact an X-Files episodes" with her dolls (*Go Eat Worms*).

The preference for television over cinema was not unique to *Goosebumps*. Other child-oriented horror series were produced and became popular during this period, none ever expanding to the cinema. What we see, then, is a move from the cinema to television for the bulk of children's horror texts of the 1990s. There are, moreover, parallels between the contents of these programmes that collectively set them apart from the children's horror films of the same period: an absence of major adult characters or families so that complete narrative agency rests on the child (or child-like) main character, and strong aesthetic and thematic links to the horror genre that are not routinely sublimated by the use of comedy. There is a sense in which these non-theatrical texts almost seem to continue directly from the children's horror films of the late 1980s, sharing strong narrative similarities with *The Gate* and *Little Monsters* (Richard Greenberg, 1989) and not much of the adult focus of *Casper* or *The Witches*. This implies that the dip in popularity of theatrical children's horror was a result not of the trend's cultural position but of the medium and its association with adult audiences.

This suggestion is supported by the other format choices in the *Goosebumps* franchise, namely the rejection of hardback editions over paperbacks. The decision is interesting not just because paperbacks were low prestige in and of themselves, cheap to produce and not very durable (sometimes even disposable), but also because it is contrary to the new rules of children's publishing of the 1990s, set by *Harry Potter*, a series so popular it was reissued as hardbacks with different covers for the children's and adult markets. When questioned about this new status quo, R.L. Stine revealed his frustration and confessed that the industry's shift "ruined publishing" for him. "[Hardcovers] are all publishers want now. The monthly book series are over," the author said.[553] In

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[553] Doll, "R.L. Stine: The Lost Interview".

another recent interview, he has commented that children's books "used to be a paperback

business. [...] They don't want that, now it's all hardcover series. And everything's a trilogy."[554]

It is curious, therefore, that *Goosebumps* did not attempt to adapt to the new standards. There was

a single hardcover *Goosebumps* (a special commemorative edition for the series' twentieth

anniversary) and only a handful of anthology books, all paperbacks. When *Goosebumps 2000* was

released the books were still paperbacks — a "relic"[555] of different times, holding on to a "doomed"

format.[556] A self-declared "paperback guy,"[557] R.L. Stine explains his fidelity to the format with child-

centered arguments: "I like one a month; kids are waiting for the next one. I also liked it because

kids could afford it. They'd come into a bookstore with five bucks and buy four different books."[558]

Both of these arguments revolve around the child's decisions and accessibility. The switch to

hardcovers might have fitted with the industry's trends but it may also have implied a loss of

autonomy for the child, who would be forced to rely on an adult's generosity in the form of a higher

allowance or their approval of the chosen book in the form of a gift. In this way, not switching to

hardbacks accomplished the same as not adapting for the cinema: it empowered the child to be in

control of his own entertainment choices.

Additionally, the paperback and television formats enabled the complete exclusion of adults from

the *Goosebumps* environment. The franchise was exclusive to children between the ages of seven

and twelve. Even at the height of *Goosebumps*'s popularity, "not many people over 13 [knew R. L.

Stine] except teachers, parents, booksellers and publishers,"[559] and even these adult exceptions

seemed to never fully immerse themselves in *Goosebumps*, instead perceiving it through the

children they were close to: a mother who wrote to Stine saying she liked his books "because they

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[554] "R.L. Stine Has Been Giving Us Goosebumps for 20 Years".
[555] Ibid.
[556] "R.L. Stine: The Lost Interview".
[557] Ibid.
[558] "R.L. Stine Has Been Giving Us Goosebumps for 20 Years".
[559] Mary W. Tabor, "At Home With: R.L. Stine; Grown-Ups Deserve Some Terror, Too," *The New York Times*, 7 September 1995.

give my kids shivers but not nightmares,"[560] the radio interviewer who "actually did watch [*The*

Haunting Hour]. Because I have ten year old boys,"[561] or even one of Stine's recent editors who

claimed to knows his work "well" because "her ten-year-old son devours his books 'like crack'."[562] As

Atlantic contributing editor James Parker noted, "fourth grade — that's the demographic bull's-

eye;"[563] no one younger, no one older. The viability of such a product — horror exclusively aimed at

children with little educational appeal beyond the encouragement of reading — is a testament to

the deep cultural changes in American society. Even so, the difficulty in associating children's horror

with cultural prestige remains evidence of the persistence of some anxieties about controlling

children.

Death of the child, birth of the teenager: dissecting "formula" and ideology through the lenses of puberty

I have so far pointed out the many ways in which *Goosebumps* worked from a new concept of

childhood and new attitudes toward children and horror but nowhere are these elements more

visible than in the stories themselves. As children repeatedly told R.L. Stine, they "like to be

scared!"[564] And there was something all-engrossing, even compulsive, about the extent to which this

desire existed in his audience, as fan letters demonstrate: "When you die, can I take over your

series?"[565] or "I've read forty of your books — and I think they're really boring!"[566] or even "I like

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[560] W. Devon; Vicky S., "Author, R.L. Stine," Teen Ink, http://www.teenink.com/nonfiction/interviews/article/5422/Author-R-L-Stine/.

[561] Matthew Peterson, "Interview with R. L. Stine," The Author Hour, http://theauthorhour.com/r-l-stine/.

[562] Jacque Wilson, "R.L. Stine Aims to Give Adults 'Goosebumps'," CNN, http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/09/living/stine-red-rain-adult-novel.

[563] Parker, "Horror for Kids - How Goosebumps Outlasted Harry Potter by Terrifying Fourth-Graders and Mocking Their Parents".

[564] Hall, "Interview with R.L Stine".

[565] R. L. Stine, *It Came from Ohio!: My Life as a Writer* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), 118.

[566] Ibid.

your books, but how come the endings never make any sense?"[567] What was thrilling to children,

however, sparked objection in some adult commentators, who criticised the series for its "horror-

cheese specifications,"[568] declaring it to be "above all a formula."[569] Scholars also frequently accused

the series of not belonging to the genre of horror: the covers are labelled "faux-gruesome"[570] by

Timothy Norris, while Kimberley Reynolds was of the opinion that these stories are only "what

[young readers] refer to as 'horror.'"[571] Reynolds, who edited a collection of essays on youth-

oriented horror, deliberately chose to not include *Goosebumps* in her analysis, explaining:

> *Though [children's horror] texts imitate the narrative voice associated with traditional horror*
>
> *— strong on suspense, intimating impending crisis, trying to create a sense that something*
>
> *dreadful is just about to happen — they are in fact primarily concerned with showing many*
>
> *childish fears to be unfounded. [...] The certainty and sense of control produced by such texts*
>
> *are precisely the opposite of the reactions inspired by horror, or any other kind of fiction*
>
> *designed to create a feeling of fear in readers.[572]*

Reynolds' collection does not make reference to Stine's work with the exception of his books in the

Point Horror series, which was aimed at teenagers aged thirteen and up. While Reynolds' reasoning

is valid within her frame of work, applying adult-oriented definitions of horror to child-oriented

texts, actively disregarding the vantage point of their target audience, strikes me as a missed

opportunity. Children frequently wrote to Stine saying which *Goosebumps* stories scared them the

most or gave them nightmares, and the topic continues to be brought up in interviews by adults who

read *Goosebumps* as children.[573] If children were buying, identifying and enjoying these materials as

horror their definition must be taken into account, even if it defies mainstream beliefs about the

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[567] Hall, "Interview with R.L Stine".
[568] Parker, "Horror for Kids - How Goosebumps Outlasted Harry Potter by Terrifying Fourth-Graders and Mocking Their Parents".
[569] Morris, *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film*, 68.
[570] Ibid., 58.
[571] Reynolds, "Introduction," 1.
[572] Ibid., 3.
[573] R.L. Stine, interview by Chad Weiss, 2012.

genre. Similarly, their claims of being scared by these books should not be disregarded simply because the books have an apparent happy ending, as child and adult readings will vary greatly. What may look like "cheap chicanery" to a seasoned horror reader might indeed be, as a reviewer put it, "a white-knuckle ride — let's not forget — for a 9-year-old."[574]

Much like Reynolds, Morris dismissed the contents of *Goosebumps* novels, wondering if "all that will come out of reading *Goosebumps* novels is a mindless, soul-deadening consumerism."[575] For this author, "the dynamic of reading and collecting may ultimately be of more cultural importance than anything in the 'content' of these series. The way we buy and save these books may effectively be their content."[576] While collecting was a part of the *Goosebumps* phenomenon, the suggestion that the series' actual contents — its stories — are irrelevant and of reduced cultural importance is unconvincing, since there were many other series children could have chosen to compulsively collect in the 1990s. Interestingly, Morris briefly mentioned that *Goosebumps* provides a 'fantasy [of pre-adolescence] for eight and nine year olds,"[577] but does not pursue the observation further nor does he connect this content feature with the series' compulsive appeal for children. My reading is that this vision of pre-adolescence is the deepest core of the *Goosebumps* franchise and one of the major reasons for its success.

That the onset of puberty is at the heart of *Goosebumps* can be easily inferred. The protagonists always face threats of physical and emotional change: becoming one with a haunted mask, turning into a werewolf, dying. And there is no selection criteria other than simply being human, as the terrors of *Goosebumps* come equally to both sexes. Boy and girl narrators alternate from one book to the next, and the main character will always team up with another child of the opposite sex or be a part of a mixed gender group. In some cases, the gender of the main character is made ambiguous

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[574] Parker, "Horror for Kids - How Goosebumps Outlasted Harry Potter by Terrifying Fourth-Graders and Mocking Their Parents".
[575] Morris, *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film*, 84.
[576] Ibid., 85.
[577] Ibid., 77.

or irrelevant through the use of genderless names (Alex, Sam, Andy, etc) and the complete

avoidance of gendered activities or stereotypically gendered interests. This equity of gender has

been quoted as one of the reasons of *Goosebumps*' appeal, as it motivates both genders to identify

with the characters and be motivated to read but equally it fits the puberty allegory. The most

explicit example of the metaphor exists in *My Hairiest Adventure*. In this story, Hairy Larry grows

"unexpected hair" and undergoes physical changes that he is embarrassed to discuss with his

parents. He does open up to Lily, a friend going through the same, as the narrative hints at the

beginnings of romantic feelings between the two. When Lily invites Larry over, he retorts like a

typical teenage boyfriend: "Are your parents going to be there?"

The physical changes are often imposed on the *Goosebumps* children, but they sometimes come as

an inevitability as the characters discover their true nature as monsters (*The Girl Who Cried*

Monster), vampires (*Vampire Breath*) or other creatures (*My Hairiest Adventure*, *The Ghost Next*

Door). In other stories, like *Welcome to Camp Nightmare*, the threats and scares come as a rite of

passage, a test or initiation ritual to judge the child's readiness to move on to the next level.

However the horror is delivered, any attempts on the child's part to avoid it are promptly punished.

In *Be Careful What You Wish For*, Samantha Byrd is given three wishes to improve her current

situation and sees them all backfire horribly, particularly the last one. Sam wishes for Judy, her

nemesis, to be given the wishes so they can ruin her life instead. Unfortunately for Sam, Judy's first

wish is for Sam to "fly away," which turns her into a bird.

Messages of acceptance for the challenges of life are common in *Goosebumps*, where revenge

attempts consistently yield tragedy. In *Calling All Creeps,* Ricky wants to get back at his school

newspaper editor but accidentally makes himself the target of the lizard aliens known as Creeps. The

revenge impulse eventually consumes Ricky entirely, as he appoints himself leader of the Creeps and

turns the entire school into his slaves. Besides condemning revenge, *Calling All Creeps* is yet another

example of the inevitability of change in the form of the old adage "if you can't beat them, join

them." *You Can't Scare Me* offers another variant of this philosophy of embracing things as they are, when Eddie and Hat finally admit that their attempts to scare Courtney will never be successful and accept that "life just isn't fair." A darker version of the same principle is seen in *Bad Hare Day*, where Tim is so elated to finally be in a real magic show that he does not seem to mind that he is only the magician's rabbit, about to be decapitated in the name of show business.

Though it may be monstrous and imposing, puberty is always positive in *Goosebumps*. This is apparent not just in the story resolutions but also in the sort of monsters that Stine chose to use and those he avoided. "I don't get zombies," the author has said, explaining why he did not write about them. "They're so unsophisticated; they just stagger forward and try to eat people, and you just hit them with a shovel or shoot them."[578] Indeed, zombies are strictly defined by their unpleasant physicality: they slug about in incapable, often mutilated, bodies, rotting and festering. They lack vitality not just in the physical sense but also mentally, as their brains decay, and emotionally, as their humanity abandons them the moment they turn into living dead; they are, and can only be, dead. These associations do not exist with other limbo creatures more often used by Stine. The vampire's body stays able, often even in ways superior to a human, and the ghost firmly holds on to its memories, transcending all limitations of the physical body while remaining human. In life, puberty does not diminish the human body but develops it; in *Goosebumps* too puberty always means life, even when it brings death to its characters — the child must die so that the teenager might live. Tellingly, when Stine eventually added a zombie story to *Goosebumps HorrorLand* in 2011 it was titled *Why I Quit Zombie School*.

This positivity is compounded by the children's ability to adapt. In the *Werewolf of Fever Swamp* episode, Grady is upset about the family's move to Fever Swamp. In words that could also easily apply to puberty, Grady complains, "I don't feel right about this place. I feel… It just feels so weird." His father's response is also revealing: "You see these deer here? Up until a couple of days ago they

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[578] Doll, "R.L. Stine Has Been Giving Us Goosebumps for 20 Years".

had never seen a swamp before. Now your Mom and I get to study how they're gonna adapt.

Because believe me, they will. It's just natural to adapt. Pretty soon they're gonna love it here. And

so are you." This inherent ability of a child to cope and adapt is further suggested by the stories'

structure both in the gradual progression of the scares and in the twist endings. The "gelatin-wobble

[…] Roald Dahl-esque irresolution"[579] of the typical *Goosebumps* story parallels the progression of

puberty in the real child while also affirming their ability to respond to progressive challenges. In *It

came From Beneath The Sink*, the evil Grool becomes Kat's responsibility for the rest of her life. Her

constant attention is needed, lest the Grool become unhappy and turn evil again. Kat does not see

this as a burden, however; she simply adapts to a new routine. When at the end of the story she is

presented with the Grool's cousin, the Lanx, her screams might suggest terror but the narrative has

already reassured the reader and viewer of Kat's power to adjust.

As they learn their skills of adaptation, *Goosebumps* children make use of another powerful weapon:

unity. Like *Casper*, *Goosebumps* also equates the on-set of puberty as a catalyst for family

togetherness, even when the opposite seems likely. Power dynamics are often present — "Isn't this

a democracy?" asks Trina in *Night of the Living Dummy 3*. "No. Not unless your father and I say it is."

—, and parents are always absent or oblivious, which has led some reviewers to read *Goosebumps*

as promoting disrespect or "mocking" parents.[580] In the context of puberty as a source of anxiety,

however, removing the parents or rendering them ineffective is crucial to the narrative of personal

growth and empowerment in *Goosebumps*. Like in the puberty process, parents are external to the

child's struggles — if they "literally cannot see"[581] the monsters, as a critic pointed out, this is not

because they are dim but because these monsters do not exist in their world; their puberty is long

overcome. And as the narratives progress, parent—child relationships are always strengthened and

portrayed as something of value in the protagonists' lives. Most television episodes feature a scene

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[579] Parker, "Horror for Kids - How Goosebumps Outlasted Harry Potter by Terrifying Fourth-Graders and Mocking Their Parents".
[580] Ibid.
[581] Ibid.

where the main character emphatically says "I love you" to his or her parents, and parental love is even used as the solution to some curses: in *The Haunted Mask*, Carly Beth can only release herself from the evil mask when she recognises her mother's token of love.

Likewise, friendship between siblings or cousins is persistently part of the positive outcomes of the adventure, and often plays a key role in its resolution: in *Night of the Living Dummy 3* siblings Trina and Dan must learn to trust and work together with their cousin Zane to defeat Slappy and his mob of living dummies. To my knowledge there is only one *Goosebumps* where this kind of reconciliation does not happen. In *The Cuckoo Clock of Doom*, Michael lives in constant torment and humiliation because of his younger sister, Terrible Tara. As a way to get back at her, Michael tampers with Dad's new cuckoo clock, accidentally reversing time and causing him to age backwards into oblivion. Michael is eventually able to restore normal time progression but in the process erases the year of his sister's birth, wiping out her existence. The story ends with Michael being much happier in his life without Tara and voicing very ambiguous thoughts on whether he should go back for her. Interestingly, *Cuckoo Clock of Doom* is considered by Stine one of his least scary books[582] — perhaps because simply ignoring a challenge is much easier than adapting to it.

In this light, *Goosebumps* does indeed follow a formula but it is less one of narrative cliché than it is of emotional soothing. Time and again, *Goosebumps* reassures its pre-teen readers: puberty is inevitable but it is also positive, it is scary but harmless and, rest assured, you will triumph — without even needing your parents —, coming out empowered and stronger in your family and friendship bonds. Just like the *Goosebumps* brand more generally, this message addresses only the pre-teen demographic, responding to an anxiety that is unique to this group of people. From this perspective, the overwhelming popularity of the *Goosebumps* series over other scary books of the time[583] and fan letters like "I've read forty of your books — and I think they're really boring!"[584] are

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[582] R.L. Stine, *Live Chat* (The Hub, 2010).
[583] Eden Ross Lipson, "Books' Hero Wins Young Minds; an Apprentice Wizard Rules the World (at Least Its Bookstores)," *The New York Times*, 12 July 1999.

revealing of more than just consumerism; they highlight the extent to which puberty was an anxiety that resonated with pre-teens and the central role of horror (particularly the overcoming of horror) in these struggles.

Conclusion

"The actual long-term impact of the *Goosebumps* series [...] may be next to nothing," wrote Morris, also remarking that "some series or other [...] is central to children's culture at any given moment. It is a rite of passage, an obligate stage in the ontogeny of the adult reader."[585] *Goosebumps* may be a rite of passage for readers (and, appropriately, is themed around one of life's biggest rites of passage), but it is also a moment of major transition for children's horror, moving it from controversial to mainstream, from ambiguity to specificity, from popular culture to children's culture. Its long-term impact is therefore quite significant, if only for children's horror. In this chapter I outlined the ways in which *Goosebumps* directly follows from the children's horror cycle and how its avoidance of the cinema allowed children's horror to settle into children's culture.

As the previous chapters have shown, the progression of the children's horror trend accompanied a change in American attitudes toward childhood and horror leaving traces of these conflicts in the film texts and reception. There are very few of these vestiges in *Goosebumps*, suggesting it as a text (and brand) entirely in accordance to commonly-accepted definitions of childhood, horror and the suitability of their combinations — thus illustrating the end of the process of resetting boundaries chronicled in children's horror. The *Goosebumps* "formula" likewise points toward a transformed cultural context, as it is condensed, refined and distilled version of the negotiations of children's horror in the 1980s and early 1990s.

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[584] Stine, *It Came from Ohio!: My Life as a Writer*, 118.
[585] Morris, *You're Only Young Twice: Children's Literature and Film*, 68.

Indeed, the four ingredients of *Goosebumps* that were key to its success are directly connected to the conclusion of the children's horror film cycle and to the resolution of the conflicts it circulated. First, the assumption of the pre-teen demographic as a separate social group, distinct subculture and valid cultural target. Second, the tailoring of contents to the anxieties specific to this group, namely the on-set of puberty, but also touching upon issues of identity, family relationships and friendships. Third, the adaptation of horror specifically to the pre-teen demographic. This included taking the premises seriously (in that the horrors of its narratives are real to its characters), thus allowing itself to be perceived as horror by its target audience, but also framing it within the boundaries of cultural suitability (minimising violence, excluding real physical danger and serious topics like divorce or bereavement, and keeping the tone light), thus allowing non-targets (parents) to perceive it as not-horror. And fourth, the selection of media formats that reach this group effectively without adult-oriented restrictions (other than general suitability), namely television and literature. The cinema, saturated with family-centered features, was excluded completely.

To be sure, these elements are present in the children's horror films, just not all at once; in contrast, the vast majority (if not entirety) of the children's horror texts that followed *Goosebumps* are firmly based on these four features. More than a case of extreme success, then, *Goosebumps* embodies a moment of sharp transition for children's horror and, indeed, a moment of completion for the children's horror trend, as this is where my timeline ends. But although *Goosebumps* marks both the peak and the end of the children's horror trend, it is far from suggesting the end of children's horror as a genre.

In 1995, Stine famously predicted that "in 10 years they won't be buying these books anymore."[586] Stine was right that his series — and children's horror in general — did not know the same level of popularity after the 1990s; all trends must die. But as the decade ended, and even as the 2000s rolled on and the 2010s after it, children continued to buy horror books. And while Stine's imitators

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[586] Tabor, "At Home With: R.L. Stine; Grown-Ups Deserve Some Terror, Too."

may not have done so well in regards to longevity, *Goosebumps* books are still found in school

libraries and bookstore shelves today, and continue to be enjoyed by pre-teen children with very

little, if any, opposition from parents and teachers. Similarly, television continues to produce

children's horror shows, like the recent British success *Wolfblood* (CBBC, 2012-present), and though

production has decreased (*Goosebumps* was cancelled after four seasons), old and new favourites

still have a place online, in dedicated channels like The Hub or on demand over Amazon Instant

Video, Netflix or iTunes. Even in the cinema, one can still catch faint echoes of children's horror, like

the upcoming *Goosebumps* film, scheduled for release in 2015 with a PG rating. Yes, children's

horror endures, encapsulated in the four elements of its "formula," as inconspicuous as any other

subcategory of children's entertainment.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the children's horror trend of the 1980s and 1990s and noted its historical, cultural, social and industrial significance. I have chiefly focused on the theatrical expression of children's horror, chronicling its main points of progression between 1980 and 1995 and in the process pointing out the ways in which it negotiated tensions around horror and children and suggested a progressive change in American attitudes. Specifically, this shift affected the cultural concept of childhood, which became more segmented to include the new demographic of the pre-teen, a transitional group between childhood and adolescence. Neither child nor teenager, the pre-teen is unique in its liminality and posed a challenge not just to the cultural boundaries of childhood but also those of suitability where the horror genre was concerned.

The difficulty of negotiating these conflicts is evident in early examples of children's horror like Disney's *The Watcher in the Woods*, a production stuck between the push toward suitable horror and the pull of traditional (and, at the time, dominant) views of childhood. *Gremlins* tackled the issue controversially in the mid-1980s, confronting American audiences with more violence and gore than would conventionally be expected of a PG-rated family-oriented film. The debate it spurred was so heated the MPAA was moved to change its rating system, introducing the PG-13 classification in 1984. This new rating signalled the cultural repair of the embattled frontiers of childhood and horror by establishing an official middle ground between the PG and R ratings and, by association, between their audiences. But PG-13 did not just stand for the social acknowledgement of a segmented concept of childhood, in which children and teenagers are clearly distinct; it also signalled a turning point for horror, as the industry now allowed a way for the genre to suit young audiences.

With these re-shaped boundaries in place, children's horror thrived in the late 1980s and soon established a pattern of themes, tone and aesthetics that connected it to the horror genre while suggesting a single-focused preoccupation with children, specifically pre-teens. This demographic,

who had been no more than an ambiguous concept during the production of *The Watcher in the Woods,* had, by the time *The Gate* was released in 1987, been recognised as a unique social group and become the target for many puberty-themed horror films under the banner of PG-13.

In reaction or response to these trends, mainstream horror in the 1990s rejected young audience targets and populated cinemas with intellectual, artistic and prestigious films addressed at adult viewers. Children's horror paralleled this change, likewise becoming preoccupied with artistic merit, technology, intellectual value and nostalgia. Both strands grew apart from the PG-13 rating: mainstream horror attached itself to the R classification and children's horror, inevitably, to the PG rating and, with it, the family film. This new status quo appealed not just to children but to adult and family audiences, bringing a much wider audience to the films in the children's horror trend. While this made them profitable, it also contributed heavily toward the sublimation of the trend's terrors: *Nightmare Before Christmas* was marketed and received not as a horror film but as a gothic fantasy of childhood innocence, despite having a premise and aesthetics reminiscent of previous children's horror titles. Other titles, like *The Addams Family* and *The Witches*, were also produced, marketed and received as something other than horror, strongly associated with humor, family and nostalgia. In eschewing its horror roots, the trend also lost its single focus on the pre-teen. As *Casper* illustrated, the pre-teen years were still often a central theme, but puberty was no longer explored through a child's eye only; rather, it was framed within the context of the family and constructed as a moment of transition for child and parent alike, in evidence of the cultural acceptance of a new notion of childhood.

As a direct consequence of these metamorphoses of horror and the family genre, the children's horror cycle entered into decline. Horror features aimed at children became increasingly hard to find after 1995, severely outnumbered by family-driven adventures and comedies. With its horror sublimated and its pre-teen focus widened, there was little to set these titles apart from other family films of the period or to bring them together with any significance. But though *Casper* may have

been the last installment of the children's horror cycle, the trend was far from obsolete in popular

culture. On the contrary, its cultural presence peaked after the end of the film cycle, in the mid- to

late-1990s, through a number of very successful book series and television programmes that

retained the horror core and pre-teen focus of the films of the 1980s. Here, the *Goosebumps*

franchise is the prime example. The "formula" of *Goosebumps* recalled 1980s' children's horror and

rejected the tendencies of the 1990s: it emphasised horror over humour, exclusively used a child's

perspective and thematically focused on the on-set of puberty and child empowerment. This was

accomplished in no small part through a preference for child-oriented media like literature and

television over the cinema, where the boundaries of suitability and expectation — of horror,

children and the cinema itself — had once again become oppressive to the combination of horror

and children.

Echoes of children's horror

I have positioned the children's horror trend strictly between 1980 and 1997 but there is children's

horror outside this timeline. Contemporary children's horror has mainly occurred in straight-to-DVD

films, such as the R.L. Stine movies *The Haunting Hour: Don't Think About It* (Alex Zamm, 2007),

Mostly Ghostly (Richard Correll, 2008) and *Mostly Ghostly: Have You Met My Ghoulfriend?* (Peter

Hewitt, 2014), or in children's television, where even a fairly exhaustive list of productions does not

include many titles: the Nickelodeon productions *Cry Baby Lane* (Peter Lauer, 2000), the *Roxy Hunter*

series of four films (2008) and *The Boy Who Cried Werewolf* (Eric Bross, 2010), Disney's

Halloweentown series, *Mom's Got a Date with a Vampire* (Stephen Boyum, 2000), *The Scream Team*

(Stuart Gillard, 2002) and *Girl vs. Monster* (2012), plus Fox's *When Good Ghouls Go Bad* (Patrick Read

Johnson, 2001) and the Canadian *My Babysitter's a Vampire* (Bruce McDonald, 2010), as well as

animated and live-action series like *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (Cartoon Network, 1999-2002), *The*

Nightmare Room (Kids' WB, 2001—2002), *R.L. Stine's The Haunting Hour* (Hub Network, 2010—

present), *Deadtime Stories* (Nickelodeon, 2012—2013) and *Spooksville* (Hub Network, 2013—2014).

In the cinema, children's horror has retained much less vigour still. It resurfaces every now and again

— *Monster House* (Gil Kenan, 2006), *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009), *The Hole* (Joe Dante, 2009),

Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant (Paul Weitz, 2009), *Frankenweenie* (Tim Burton, 2012),

ParaNorman (Chris Butler and Sam Fell, 2012), *Goosebumps* (Rob Letterman, 2015) and others —,

but these titles are far from a revival of children's horror, even if they have attained high levels of

visibility. Rather, they are echoes: *The Hole* could pass for a re-imagining of *The Gate*; *Coraline* was

marketed with heavy reliance on *Nightmare Before Christmas*; *ParaNorman* in turn was marketed

through its connections to *Coraline* and, because of its animation style, to Tim Burton and

Nightmare; *Frankenweenie* is a remake from the 1980s; and *Goosebumps* capitalises almost

exclusively on nostalgia over the book series. The progression of these echoes is evidence to the

diminishing cultural resonance of the core elements of the children's horror trend (horror and pre-

teens), thus confirming the timeline and conclusions of this thesis, but these films also point toward

the continued significance of the children's horror cycle. This point is worthy of some attention here,

as it helps to highlight the broader implications of this study.

The place of children in horror

M. Night Shyamalan's *The Visit* (2015) has been described by critic Manohla Dargis in terms very

reminiscent of children's horror: the film, a PG-13 first-person account of children in peril, is "an

amusingly grim fairy tale, […] a 'Hansel and Gretel' redo for Generation Selfie [that features] a

Spielbergian family dynamic."[587] Writing for the *New York Times*, Dargis' perspective is what we

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[587] Manohla Dargis, "Review: 'The Visit' Is 'Hansel and Gretel' with Less Candy and More
Camcorders," The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/movies/review-the-visit-
is-hansel-and-gretel-with-less-candy-and-more-camcorders.html?_r=0.

might call "generalist." Accordingly, therefore, it differs greatly from the "specialist" horror opinions: horror critic Jake Dee commented on the "out of place heartfelt moments," the "diluted PG-13 attempt at true terror," and the "anodyne horror story," concluding: "Had this gone the hard R-route [how much] more memorable the overall experience just might be."[588] The differences in reception are not surprising — where regular critics read the film as intentionally child-friendly, the concept was not mentioned or valued within the context of horror fandom. What is more interesting in this case, however, is not where the two perspectives differ but where they agree: neither side questioned the centrality of children. On the contrary, their presence in this horror film is so unremarkable that it never warrants mention other than to describe the set-up — a legacy of the children's horror trend, perhaps.

But while child characters are accepted in horror today, child audiences still prove challenging. Indeed, expectations on the level of intensity of the film have not been in line with this apparent acceptance of children in the genre. "It's as though Shyamalan reconsidered," mused one reviewer, "and decided to protect rather than endanger [the child characters]. While that's understandable from a parental standpoint, it ensures that The Visit bears only a fleeting resemblance to a funhouse joy ride."[589] Curiously, Shyamalan's thought process seems to have been contrary to what this reviewer suggests. What starts as a close replica of children's horror conventions, suddenly shifts gear after the twist, when the children learn that the couple they thought were their grandparents are actually murderers. If *The Visit* had remained close to the "formula" of children's horror, the children would at this point find and release their real grandparents and trap the impersonators, at which point their mother would arrive with the police, prompting a family reconciliation. Instead, the children discover the dead bodies of their grandparents and, after an intense confrontation, kill the dangerous impersonators, at which point their mother arrives with help. The film then concludes

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[588] Jake Dee, "The Visit (Movie Review)," Arrow in the Head, http://www.joblo.com/horror-movies/news/the-visit-movie-review-226.
[589] Peter Martin, "Review: The Visit, a Fleeting Resemblance to a Funhouse Joy Ride," twitch, http://twitchfilm.com/2015/09/review-the-visit-a-fleeting-resemblance-to-a-funhouse-joy-ride.html.

with a monologue from their mother about her pain at never reconciling with her parents, closely followed by a comedy scene in which Becca and Tyler appear to be recovered from the traumatic events.

The difference between the two possible outcomes is significant in terms of expectations of horror and ideology. While the first ending dispels trauma by avoiding death and restoring family harmony, the second relies on human death, heightening the intensity of the conflict and, moreover, impeding reconciliation within the family. It is unclear how this second ending might be a symptom of Shyamalan's decision to protect the child characters rather than endanger them, as it seems to be precisely the opposite. As another critic wrote, the last shots are "unlike the look and the feel of the preceding 90 minutes – heavier, scarier, something from something rated R."[590] To be sure, critics were confused about the tone of *The Visit*. Even if many did compare the film to a fairy tale, none drew a connection between Shyamalan's work and children's horror (and it is unclear if Shyamalan himself ever did, either). Thus the real legacy of children's horror is mixed: children have transcended Otherness and become legitimate figures in mainstream horror but the idea of actual children watching these films still sits uneasy in the core of horror fandom.

The legitimacy of children as horror audiences

Another example helps to illustrate this point further: *Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse* (Christopher Landon, 2015), a film "originally conceived as a PG-13 zombie film for kids" which eventually became "an R-rated, adult zombie film." The reasons behind the change are telling: for one producer, it allowed them "to push the envelope a little bit because we've all seen zombie films at this point;" for another, "it's just so much more fun" – two reasons united in their assumption

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[590] Brad Wheeler, "The Visit: Pastoral Horror Comedy Is a Genuinely Fun Affair," The Globe and Mail, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/the-visit-pastoral-horror-comedy-is-a-genuinely-fun-affair/article26315289/.

that adults are the core target for a zombie horror film. And, sure enough, a major driving force for the change came from Christopher Landon, who "really came at it from a fan's perspective of, 'okay, what haven't I see and what would be really cool to see.'"[591] In interview, Landon has spoken of his vision for this project in clear terms of horror fandom: "For me it was just about the gore, because [...] they were trying to go PG-13 and it was never going to happen. I'm a big horror fan and when I see a zombie movie I want gore, I want to see guts and all that stuff because it's fun."[592]

It is impossible not to draw a connection here with *The Lost Boys*, another children's horror turned R-rated because of its director's adult-centric vision. But where *Boys* maintained some of its pre-teen target and focus, *Scouts* skewed completely toward adult viewers. This is curious, as Landon has cited many child-oriented films as his inspiration, including *Gremlins*. "We're actually making an 80s movie," he has said. "I describe it as a gory R-rated version of *The Goonies*."[593] The comment is important, because a gory R-rated and child-free version of *The Goonies* is nothing at all like *The Goonies*. But the sentiment has been equally expressed by the producing team: "Amblin! Amblin-esque. I can't tell you how many times we've used the term Amblin-esque with this film, especially back when it was more of a zombie film for kids. [...] These films did such a beautiful job of making it fun but still really scare the bejeezus out of you."[594] Landon took the comparison further:

> *I'm just proud of making a movie that feels like something that I watched when I was a kid. I've missed these movies; I feel like they're not being made anymore and I think everything is either $5 million and small or it's a gigantic tent pole, and we've lost the spirit. I'm really*

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[591] Jake Dee, "Set Visit: Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse (Part 2)," Arrow in the Head, http://www.joblo.com/horror-movies/news/set-visit-scouts-guide-to-the-zombie-apocalypse-part-2-183.
[592] Staci Layne Wilson, "Scout's Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse -- Exclusive Set Visit Interview: Christopher Landon," Dread Central, http://www.dreadcentral.com/news/122173/scouts-guide-to-the-zombie-apocalypse-exclusive-set-visit-interview-christopher-landon/.
[593] Ibid.
[594] Dee, "Set Visit: Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse (Part 2)".

grateful [to be making] a movie that I think that audiences really want to see but they are

just not getting.[595]

And yet, *Scouts* is the result of a concerted effort to avoid the Amblin audience and the Amblin

ratings. As Landon put it, "there's so many tits and there's so much blood and stuff in this movie that

there's no chance that we're not a hard R."[596] Thus there is an impossible clash at work in *Scouts*. On

one side, the film's original spirit (reflected in its use of children's horror conventions) and Landon's

desire to revive the 1980s' style of filmmaking; on the other, the will to preserve assumptions about

horror and its audience. The contradiction is obvious in the film's text, which stars adults dressed as

children using toy-like weapons, but also in the way Landon and his production team talk about the

film. Indeed, the things Landon "misses" and those that inspired him, those "Amblin-esque" details,

are exactly the things he has rejected in *Scouts* — including, incidentally, its originality: the thing that

"hasn't been seen before" in zombie films is what the first draft of *Scouts* offered, a zombie film for

kids.

In this way, *Scouts Guide to the Apocalypse* does not simply illustrate the on-going complexity of

negotiating expectations of horror and younger audiences; it provides an example of how this study

on children's horror can nourish a deeper interpretation of modern developments in the horror

genre. It is only by knowing the children's horror trend that we can recognise how entrenched its

principles have become, how influential these films were for the children who watched them, and –

significantly —, how it has all been digested and transformed as those children became adults,

particularly adult horror fans. As *Scouts* demonstrates, there is a deep schism between the legacy

and memory of children's horror and contemporary attitudes.

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[595] Wilson, "Scout's Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse -- Exclusive Set Visit Interview: Christopher Landon".
[596] Ibid.

Pre-teens and the cinema, an impossible relationship?

An issue that reflects the difficulties of negotiating this memory in a contemporary context is the place of children as audiences, not just as audiences of horror but as audiences of cinema more generally. The issue is clearly illustrated by the *Goosebumps* film, an adaptation faithful not to the ethos of the original franchise but to the memory of it — and not the memory of a child but a memory through adult eyes, which forced dramatic changes onto the franchise's "formula," previously so central to its success. The first of these changes is the lack of children, who are replaced by older teenagers. In a second change, these "children" have very reduced narrative agency, vastly overshadowed by the (adult) character of R.L. Stine. The third significant change is the lack of a single focused threat, replaced in the film by an ensemble of monsters with no discernible relation to the young characters and, therefore, devoid of emotional meaning. Instead, the monsters are "an expression of Stine's own inner demons, with their creator forced to finally face them head-on,"[597] providing Stine, not the "children," with narrative opportunity for self-empowerment, and straying away from connections to puberty.

These changes re-direct the audience address of the *Goosebumps* franchise from a strictly pre-teen target to "the twenty-somethings who embraced the books growing up and the children that generation has begun to spawn."[598] The courting of nostalgic Millennials is evident in the characters' age, closer to the young adult audience than to children, as well as the basis of the plot: like today's Millennials, the characters have read *Goosebumps* in the 1990s, and it is through those cherished memories that they are able to capture the monsters. The theme of puberty is then replaced with a topic more relevant to its target audience, the nostalgic pleasures of having been a *Goosebumps* fan. This nostalgic angle was intentional and part of the project from the start. According to producer Neal Moritz, the aim of the team was to "make a movie that harkened to the past. Amblin movies,

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[597] Kenji Fujishima, "Goosebumps," Slant Magazine, http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/goosebumps.
[598] Michael Sauter, "Film Review: Goosebumps," Film Journal International, http://www.filmjournal.com/reviews/film-review-goosebumps.

things like 'Goonies' or 'Gremlins' or even movies like 'Stand By Me,' where there's a great dynamic

between kids."[599] But, as was the case with *Scouts*, the resulting film is far from its inspirations. As

critic A.A. Dowd wrote,

> [It] *rarely recalls the old preteen page-turners for which it's named [...] This here*
>
> *is Goosebumps for today's kids, meaning that [Stine's stories have] been replaced by the kind*
>
> *of noisy, frenetic amusement-park ride that now passes for all-ages entertainment. [...]*
>
> *Squint hard enough and it is possible to see the phantom impression of an Amblin*
>
> *entertainment, especially given the Spielbergian dead-daddy backstory Zach's provided. But*
>
> *drawing that parallel only underlines how sanitized, how danger-free, family films have*
>
> *gotten in the two decades since Stine's bestselling heyday.[600]*

The contrast also further highlights the problems children's horror encounters in the cinema, namely

the inevitability of having its narrative infiltrated by adults. Here, this thesis provides more than

examples to support Dowd's parallels; it also sheds new light on the PG-13 rating and its deep

industrial impact. The effect of PG-13 on the children's film may have been mostly ignored by

academics, but it is no secret among family film critics, as illustrated by this passage in Scott

Mendelson's review of *Goosebumps*:

> *I talk quite a bit about the death of the out-and-out kid movie. No, I'm not talking about*
>
> *animated features, I'm talking about live-action, G or PG-rated features that are explicitly*
>
> *pitched to a kid-friendly level. Back in the early 2000's, when the general audience-friendly,*
>
> *PG-13, four-quadrant, global blockbuster fantasy franchise film basically took over the*

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[599] Donna Dickens, "'Goosebumps' Producer Neal Moritz Almost Gave up on the Whole Idea," HitFix, http://www.hitfix.com/harpy/goosebumps-producer-neal-moritz-almost-gave-up-on-the-whole-idea.
[600] A. A. Dowd, "Goosebumps Bears Little Resemblance to the Kid-Lit Horror Books It Pillages," A.V. Club, http://www.avclub.com/review/goosebumps-bears-little-resemblance-kid-lit-horror-226738.

industry, we didn't just lose the adult-skewing movies outside of the awards season, we lost

the kid films too.[601]

If the connection is not made in academia the omission speaks volumes about how we understand ratings but also how we understand children's relationship with the cinema. Scholars who debate children's entertainment or children's media tend to focus almost exclusively on children's television and digital environments, as if children's cinema was not relevant or even as if it did not exist — and perhaps the latter is true. As this thesis has shown, the end of the children's horror cycle was dictated in large part by the cinema's hostility toward child-specific stories, and not much has changed since. It is no coincidence that the majority of children's horror echoes has overtly been associated with a sense of nostalgia for the films of the 1980s and early 1990. *Monster House*, for instance, caused one critic to flash back to "films from the early 1980's like 'Gremlins,' 'Poltergeist,' 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' and the Joe Dante segment of 'Twilight Zone' — films that were aimed at younger audiences but still had a certain intensity to them. This is something that has been largely lost in family films in the last few years."[602] Another reviewer echoes these thoughts, also drawing a strong connection between the tone of this film, its inspirations and the time of pre-adolescence:

> *There is something decidedly '80s about Monster House.* [...] [The film] *has more than a whiff of The Goonies* [about it]. *Chock-full of effective PG frights, exuberant innocence* [and] *an honest, believable look at pre-teen emotions, all hooked into a universally recognisable premise* [...]*, Monster House is rich enough to transport you instantly back to childhood, '80s or otherwise.*[603]

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[601] Scott mendelson, "Review: 'Goosebumps' Is a Scary Good, Kid-Friendly Lovecraftian Horror Comedy," Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2015/10/05/review-goosebumps-is-a-scary-good-kid-friendly-lovecraftian-horror-comedy/.

[602] Peter Sobcynski, "Interview: Gil Kenan -- Landlord of the "Monster House"," efilmcritic.com, http://www.efilmcritic.com/feature.php?feature=1895&printer=1.

[603] Ian Freer, "Monster House," Empire Online, http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/ReviewComplete.asp?FID=10518.

Super 8 (J.J. Abrams, 2013) is another example of a nostalgic child-oriented film. It was described by critics as "a poetic rendering of preadolescent anguish in a horror-film setting,"[604] a film that recalled "not just early Spielberg but '80s favourites *Stand By Me* and *The Monster Squad.*"[605] But this nostalgia was not so much "for a time," according to Roger Ebert, "but for a style of filmmaking, when shell-shocked young audiences were told a story and not pounded over the head with aggressive action. Abrams treats early adolescence with tenderness and affection."[606] Ebert's observation is in itself nostalgic for that time — back in 1985 the critic wrote how *Goonies*, much like *Gremlins*, was Spielberg's way of "congratulating [children] on their ability to take the heavy-duty stuff."[607]

Is there space for this sort of narrative in today's cinema landscape? It is hard to say. Consider horror's relationship with animation. Other than special effects and puppets, animation did not have a strong presence in the trend until the 1990s; from this point onward, however, it has dominated (even monopolised). This situation has an interesting correlation with ratings and mainstream success: of the recent children's horror echoes that have unequivocally targeted themselves at children, over half have been fully animated, rated PG and fairly successful (e.g. *Coraline*); their live-action counter-parts have tended to be rated PG-13 and not as popular with audiences (e.g. *The Hole*). To complicate it further, the situation is reversed in television, where most children's horror is live-action. What this suggests is a strong popular notion of children's horror (and the sort of child-focused narrative it implies) as belonging to the children's sphere exclusively and moreover strongly dependant on overt signals of this condition (i.e. animation, television, the PG rating) for commercial viability. If it crosses over into the adult sphere, where cinema seems to reside, it is filtered through adult values (i.e, the R rating or the family film) and adopts a strong nostalgic perspective. The

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[604] Richard Corliss, "Super 8: Just as Great as You Hoped It Would Be," Time, http://entertainment.time.com/2011/06/02/super-8-movie-review/2/.
[605] Jamie Graham, "Super 8 Review," GamesRadar, http://www.gamesradar.com/super-8-review/.
[606] Roger Ebert, "Super 8," RogerEbert.Com, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/super-8-2011.
[607] "The Goonies."

middle-ground – a live-action child-focused narrative of appropriate intensity – simply does not exist.

It cannot be said that children have no place as cinema audiences today because the family film industry is still alive and well but we should be questioning the exclusion of child and pre-teen audiences from popular cinema. This question is all the more pressing given the absolute centrality of pre-teen audiences in triggering PG-13 and the industrial changes that followed, and the undeniable cultural gravitas of the films in the children's horror trend (and others with similar sensibility, such as *The Goonies*). These films did not target families, they did not target nostalgic adults (or at least not exclusively or even primarily), and they did not target children in a general sense – they targeted pre-teens, boys and girls. The difference is key, and the lack of a present-day successor to these features is surely a relevant issue in today's analysis of film and of children's culture.

The Millennial "rebellion" or, the generation who came of age twice

One last way in which this thesis has wider implications is in the understanding of the Millennial generation and the cultural changes it has navigated. In this thesis I specifically addressed the emergence of the pre-teen as a Millennial event, but this major cultural and social change was in no way insulated. On the contrary, its ripples are still being felt today: the addition of a whole new step to our understanding of the life stages has dramatically changed not just perceptions of childhood but also notions of adolescence and, significantly, adulthood.

A brief look at contemporary pop culture fuels this train of thought. As mentioned above, contemporary popular culture is ripe with nostalgia for the 1980s and 1990s aimed in great part at Millennials. Besides *Goosebumps*, recent years have seen the nostalgic revivals of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, 2008), *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*

(Rob Cohen, 2008), *The Karate Kid* (Harald Zwart, 2010), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Jonathan

Liebesman, 2014), Michael Bay's *Transformers* series, plus *Jurassic World*, the upcoming

Ghostbusters and J.J. Abrams' new episode in the *Star Wars* series, as well as the rumoured *Gremlins*

3, The NeverEnding Story remake and *Xena: Warrior Princess* reboot, not to mention Nickeoldeon's

latest revival channel, The Splat, dedicated exclusively to reruns of 1990s' hits. In addition to these,

we have revived a number of other franchises which were not originally aimed at children but found

a young (and devoted) audience through television, VHS, toys and video games in the 1990s:

Predators (Nimrod Antal, 2010), the *Alien* series with *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012), *RoboCop* (José

Padilha, 2014), *Mad Max; Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015), *Terminator Genisys* (Alan Taylor, 2015),

and the 2016 new series of *The X-Files*. These and other titles like *The Goonies* emblazon t-shirts and

all sorts of prestige and collector's merchandise aimed at adults, including highly detailed action

figures, made not for play but display.

There is a hint of irony here, in the suggestion that the contemporary mainstream film might be

repackaged children's film while the children's film existence is uncertain, but what it also underlines

is the very clear cultural link between the Millennial pre-teen years and the Millennial young adult

years: two moments of transition connected by popular fiction (itself strongly based on motifs of

transition). This connection is further emphasized by the children's horror echoes mentioned above.

Scouts Guide to the Apocalypse, for instance, is described as a "coming of age movie" by its

producers: "It's these three boys who are making that transition from childhood to adulthood."

Here, the term "coming of age" is interpreted curiously: while *Goonies* came out of childhood into

the "age" of adulthood (or, more precisely, adolescence), *Scouts* came out of childhood (or, more

exactly, adolescence) into adulthood. This contemporary fluidity of a "coming of age" concept has

been unintentionally illustrated in Scott Mendelson's review of *The Visit*: "If my life is a succession of

director fandoms, I came of age on Tim Burton, spent my college years worshipping M. Night

Shyamalan, and became an actual adult during Chris Nolan's blockbuster years."[608] Note how

Mendelson distinctly separated "coming of age" and becoming "an actual adult," suggesting that the

two are not in fact the same thing. "Coming of age" is associated with the transition out of

childhood, certainly, but not into adulthood; instead, what follows it is a period of transition and,

pointedly, of education. The idea of the university years as a moment of preparation for adulthood is

very reminiscent of Philippe Aries and his thoughts on the association between the "discovery" of

childhood and a cultural emphasis on education.

If Millennials are the most highly educated generation so far,[609] and given the unique characteristics

of the university experience, we might speculate on the existence of two separate "coming of age"

moments in the Millennial (and beyond) life spectrum. Here, this thesis' conclusions on the pre-teen

as a distinct Millennial figure can serve as the springboard for new perspectives and questions. A

transition cannot logically lead into another transition; therefore the pre-teen years cannot function

as a transition into the transitional period of adolescence. Instead, what the existence of the pre-

teen suggests is that adolescence is a life stage in and of itself, needing a transitional period both

into it and out of it – the pre-teen at the start and the young adult (or emerging adult,[610] or

"twixter,"[611] or "20-something"[612]) at the end, resulting in two distinct "coming of age" moments,

and confounding the idea of a strict childhood—adulthood spectrum. "How will Millennials rebel

against the elder-built world?" wondered Howe and Strauss in their study of this generation. "One

often hears it said that every generation rebels [but] the Millennials won't."[613] The emergence of the

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[608] Scott Mendelson, "Review: M. Night Shyamalan's 'the Visit' Is a Glorious Return to Form," Forbes, http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2015/09/09/review-m-night-shyamalans-the-visit-is-a-glorious-return-to-form/.

[609] Victoria Stilwell, "Millennials Most-Educated U.S. Age Group after Downturn: Economy," Bloomberg Business, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-08/millennials-become-most-educated-u-s-age-group-due-to-recession.
[610] Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*.
[611] Lev Grossman, "Grow Up? Not So Fast," Time Magazine, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1018089,00.html.
[612] Henig, "What Is It About 20-Somethings?".
[613]Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 58.

pre-teen and its triggering of a "discovery" of young adulthood provides at least some food for thought on how the Millennial generation might have changed (though not necessarily rebelled against) elder-built concepts: childhood, adulthood and everything in between.

In this thesis I have presented a map to the children's horror trend, a study on the emergence of the pre-teen and a commentary on the tremendous significance of the two events. My future research will continue to focus on the subject of children and horror, addressing some of the implications outlined in this conclusion, but I hope the children's horror debate continues with the voices of other authors and I look forward to those dialogues.

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