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(Re)Animating the Horror Genre: Explorations in Children's Animated Horror Films

(Re)Animating the Horror Genre: Explorations in Children's Animated Horror Films

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project seeks to define the subgenre of children's animated horror film by examining its classification within the children's film genre and its use of generic conventions of horror. While this project does not aim to conflate children's film as a genre and animation as a medium, the scope of this project will be limited to children's animated horror films from 1993 – present day. In order to explore the subgenre of children's animated horror films from 1993-present, I will focus specifically on the following films: Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit* (2005), Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2006), *Monster House* (2006), *Igor* (2008), *Coraline* (2009), *9* (2009), *Frankenweenie* (2012), *Hotel Transylvania* (2012), and *ParaNorman* (2012). These films not only raise questions about children and childhood, but also specifically engage in the generic conventions of horror through various monsters, use of comedy, gender stereotypes, and generic hybridity. By engaging in conversations with the conventions of horror films, children's animated horror film legitimates its status as a horror subgenre, not merely simple children's films.

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this project to Eli Robert. You certainly made the race between this project and your arrival a unique and unforgettable experience.

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## **CHILDREN’S ANIMATED HORROR FILMS: AN INTRODUCTION**

Trends in current horror films, such as the *Saw* franchise, elicit images of blood, gore, somatic violence, and other various forms of physical and psychological torture, which is why the phrase “children's horror film” appears paradoxical. There is clear cultural anxiety regarding age and appropriate cinematic content, which is evidenced by early Hollywood morality codes and more recently the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system. A child’s engagement with any element of cinematic horror creates a debate about whether or not horror films are suitable for children. On the one hand, critics such as Joseph Strayhorn posit, “The notion that horror films are good for children is untenable; the more realistic debate is how much harm can they do” (Derdeyn and Strayhorn 166). On the other hand, scholars like Andre Derdeyn assert, “Horror films and adolescents are a medium and age group that seem made for each other” (Derdeyn and Strayhorn 165). However, a dichotomous approach to children’s horror films is not the sole approach to the debate.

Joanne Cantor and Mary Beth Oliver explode this bifurcation in order to explore the ways in which children respond differently to horror than their adult counterparts. Cantor and Oliver claim, “Viewers of different ages will be frightened by different components of horror films, just as they are frightened by different real-world stimuli” (230). Their argument moves away from the assumption of harm and centers on the different stimuli that effect children such as animals, darkness, monsters, and strangeness. Moreover, they argue that younger children, defined as ages 3-8, “will be more responsive than older children and adults to the visually grotesque aspects of horror film stimuli” (231). This enhanced response to the visually grotesque helps explain why there is a cultural anxiety surrounding children and the current trends in horror. According to Michael A. Arnzen, “Many films today use graphic violence to achieve effect . . . Nearly all

action/adventure, suspense/mystery, and science fiction/horror films have a high threshold for graphic violence” (177).

Because of the increase in slasher and torture porn films within the larger genre of horror since 2000, the heightened sensitivity of children toward elements of gore would ostensibly make children’s horror film an impossible subgenre. However, despite the increase of gory horror films, societal concern has created, rather than repressed, a thriving market for horror films that are appropriate for children. A variety of film companies are creating movies to cater to children and address cultural concerns about age and appropriate cinematic content. Much like Walt Disney Productions in the 1930s, companies such as Laika, Sony Pictures Animation, and DreamWorks are creating films that offer safe alternatives to mainstream horror gore for children, which has led to this emerging subgenre of children’s horror film.

This project seeks to define the subgenre of children’s animated horror film by examining its classification within the children’s film genre and its use of generic conventions of horror. While this project does not aim to conflate children’s film as a genre and animation as a medium, the scope of this project will be limited to children’s animated horror films from 1993 – present day. Defining children’s animated horror film is doubly complicated due to the difficult nature of classifying what constitutes both children’s film and horror. Before exploring the generic conventions endemic to this subgenre in the following chapters, I must first establish a definition for children’s film, as well as horror film, in order to provide justification for examining these particular films.

## **CHILDREN’S FILMS AND HORROR**

When exploring children’s horror film, we cannot conflate “children’s horror film” with animated horror film. Films like the unrated 2008 animated film, *Dead Space: Downfall*, are

clearly not meant for young audiences. Moreover, there appears to be a certain amount of horror endemic to G and PG rated children's films that are typically classified as beloved classics. For example, AMC released a list of the “Best Animated Horror Films,” and two of the films mentioned, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Pinocchio* (1940), are often cited as examples of classic Disney fairy tales, not horror films. Even esteemed horror writer Stephen King lists his first horror film as *Bambi* (1942) (Bouzereau). Clearly, classic tales that include the unexpected death of parents and cruel treatment at the hands of wicked people contain elements that are horrific, even without the label of horror film.

If we remove the term animated from the requirements of children’s horror film, we can include other live-action films such as *Something Wicked this Way Comes* (1983), *Gremlins* (1984), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Little Monsters* (1989) and *The Witches* (1990). All of these films are rated G or PG and have at least one juvenile protagonist that faces horrifying and/or supernatural situations. These films target a young audience and are easily regarded as children’s horror films. Starting with Henry Selick’s 1993 release of Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, many children's horror films have, in fact, been animated. In 2012 alone, Laika released *ParaNorman*, Sony Pictures Animation released *Hotel Transylvania*, and Disney released *Frankenweenie*. Even though all three films were released within two months of each other, they each grossed over \$35 million, with *Hotel Transylvania* grossing over \$145 million alone (Box Office Mojo). While children’s horror films can be live-action, the tendency to conflate children’s films with animation has created not only more children’s horror film in the medium of animation, but also a cinematic formula for success.

## DEFINING CHILDREN'S FILMS

The increased production and commercial success of the children's animated horror film subgenre elicits critical attention. There is a propensity to treat children's film in a similar manner to children's literature. Perry Nodelman discusses several perceptions of children's literature in his seminal text, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*. He enumerates that children's literature is often characterized as simple, action oriented, innocent, optimistic, didactic, and repetitious (190). Maria Nikolajeva calls for a redefinition of children's literature because the genre is “coming closer to mainstream literature” (222). We must also redefine children's film in order to free it from simple readings associated with children's genres. This liberation will allow engagement with larger issues produced by mainstream generic conventions.

The genre of children's film is a difficult category to define by itself, and becomes increasingly more problematic to define as it interacts with the horror genre. Obviously, there is a children's film genre, but it remains unclear what the phrase “children's” film means. Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples explore two possibilities for this term: “This term can mean simply the exhibition of films for a general audience containing some children; it can also mean the dedicated production of films for children” (92). Both of these definitions hinge on the word “children,” which Bazalgette and Staples identify as people under age twelve. Undoubtedly, the number twelve is an arbitrary marker, but it does indicate that the term “child” is a concept difficult to define without contextualizing it in cinema. Ian Wojcik-Andrews moves away from age classification and focuses on defining children's film according to the MPAA rating system. For Wojcik-Andrews, G-rated films are aimed at children, PG-13 films are made about childhood, and R-rated films are films “children see regardless of whether or not they are

children's films" (6). This definition points to the arbitrariness of the MPAA rating system and its relation to children's films. It suggests that children's films are those that children watch regardless of the film's rating: "There are 'children's films,' but there is no such thing as a children's film" (Wojcik-Andrews 19). R.C Neighbors and Sandy Rankin start from Wojcik-Andrews' conclusion that defining children's film might be impossible, but they contend that it is still possible to discuss children's films by focusing on three characteristics: form, content, and marketing. Children's films often take the *form* of animation in American culture, but can also be live-action. The *content* of most children's films is G or PG rated because it "lack[s] most objectionable material" (8). Most films that are G or PG rated have advertising and merchandising in place. While films are lucrative, the continued sales of toys, books, and video games, not to mention licensing, garner revenue after the initial run and financial success of the film.

These three definitions indicate the already challenging nature of defining children's film as a genre, but all three suggest that the genre does, in fact, exist even if there is no precise definition. To further complicate this genre, Nodelman discusses the concept of "the hidden adult" in relationship to children's literature. According to Nodelman, "the practical and economic audience for texts of children's literature is not children but rather the adult editors, publishers reviewers, librarians, and parents who produce, market, distribute, recommend, select, and purchase children's books" ("*Hidden Adult*" 207). For Nodelman, there is an economic audience and an intended audience. Nodelman posits, "children's literature can be understood as simple literature that communicates by means of reference to a complex repertoire of unspoken but implied adult knowledge" (206).

Although Nodelman is discussing the role of the hidden adult to children's literature, the concept easily applies to children's film and presents some major challenges to defining the genre. Adults are truly the economic audience for children's film. Adults direct, produce, distribute, review, and ultimately buy/rent films. Moreover, some would even argue that Nodelman's shadow text is the same doubly coded messages in children's film that contain "some elements that are designed to appeal to (and send messages to) young viewers and others that are designed for the adults who accompany the youngsters to the movie theater" (Booker "Disney" xxi). The concept of the hidden adult already complicates the audience for children's film because we now have a primary audience of children and a hidden audience of adults who hold economic power. However, because of children's films trend of reaching blockbuster status, we must question if there is still a hidden adult or if adults are now an intended audience as well. I argue that children's films now have two intended audiences, and neither one is hidden. Generic hybridity's ability to overtly entertain both children and adults complicate the notion of intended audience and thus problematizes the "children" in children's film. If, as Nodelman asserts, the term children applies more to the audience than actual content of the text, un hiding the adult in children's film problematizes the genre to potential extinction. In this way, children's films are becoming closer to mainstream films, like Nikolajeva suggests about children's literature, and thus require redefinition in order to be read without the negative and limiting associations of children's culture.

## **DEFINING HORROR FILM**

In addition to the difficulty of defining children's film, horror presents its own challenges with an array of definitions from both avid fans and scholars alike. Some people assume "audiences generally understand the term [horror] enough to organize their own viewing in

relation to it” (Hutchings 1). While this statement holds some truth, it does not help establish the boundaries of the genre, which are beneficial to both academic scholars and film companies. In the 1970s and 1980s, Robin Wood was one of the first critics to initiate a scholarly investigation into horror films. Through several seminal essays, Wood examines the social context for reading horror films. Ultimately, by discussing the “political subtext” and “return of the repressed,” Wood argues that the horror genre “can be far more radical and fundamentally undermining than works of conscious social criticism, which must always concern themselves with the possibility of reforming aspects of a social system whose basic rightness must not be challenged” (78). Wood primarily looks at monsters’ relationships with the social mainstream and contends that even though the monster is conquered and the status quo is reaffirmed, subversive energy still exists because of the presence of alternatives.

With an emphasis still firmly on monsters, Noël Carroll’s text, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Human Heart* (1990), examines the features of art-horror, as opposed to nature-horror (events and concerns of real life). Carroll’s approach is far less politicized and more concerned with the aesthetic violation of the monster. For example, monsters in horror art are “typically adjudged impure or disgusting within culture” (49). The monsters’ aesthetic violations create a reaction that is consistent throughout all art-horror, regardless of physical or temporal setting. Still working within the parameters of his influential text, Carroll posits the following definition of horror in his 1999 article, “Horror and Humor”:

A horror fiction, then, is a narrative or image in which at least one monster appears, such that the monster in question is designed to elicit an emotional response from us that is a complex compound of fear and disgust in virtue of the potential danger or threat the monster evinces and in virtue of its impurity. Central to the classification of a fiction as art-horror or genre-horror is that it contains a monster designed to arouse the emotions of fear in the audience in virtue of its harmfulness, and that of revulsion in virtue of impurity (151).



For Carroll, horror is centrally concerned with monsters and the audience's negative reactions to them, including revulsion and fear.

Following Wood's and Carroll's definitions, many academics have included additional characteristics in the genre such as the role of gender, the visual and aural aesthetics, and even questions regarding the necessity of a monster in horror. Peter Hutchings emphasizes, "the numerous definitions of horror cinema do not fit together into a cohesive whole" (4). While establishing parameters of a genre are necessary, Tony Magistrale posits, "Horror cinema remains one of the great barometers of popular culture for measuring the cultural advances and the anxieties that attend these advances at any given moment in time" (18). If horror is a cultural barometer, then a cohesive definition cannot exist to explain the wide range of horror movies from the Universal monster movies of the 1930s to the torture porn films of the 2000s.

## **CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILM**

Drawing on the aforementioned scholarly definitions regarding children's and horror films, this project will focus on children's animated horror film using the following definition: (1) a full-length, animated, feature film, (2) marketed primarily to an audience of children with a rating of G or PG, (3) and containing gothic elements including, but not limited to, monsters, ghosts, reanimated corpses, supernatural occurrences, and castles/old houses. Throughout this project, I use the term gothic to denote a specific visual aesthetic. While I could restrict this project to deal with children's gothic film, the title children's horror film aligns this subgenre with its "adult" counterpart, and thus allows the space to critically analyze it within a larger, mainstream genre, which frees it from simple readings. However, the horror in children's horror film is not necessarily synonymous with the definitions posited by scholars like Carroll. For example, some films I will explore have monsters that are aesthetically cute, not a violation, and

do not present fear, but rather slapstick comedy. Children's horror, therefore, cannot simply subsume all the characteristics of mainstream horror; the subgenre adapts the characteristics of horror like fear, monster aesthetics, gothic elements and settings and re-appropriates them for intended audience and ratings.

In order to explore the subgenre of children's animated horror films from 1993-present, I will focus specifically on the following films: Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit* (2005), Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2006), *Monster House* (2006), *Igor* (2008), *Coraline* (2009), *9* (2009), *Frankenweenie* (2012), *Hotel Transylvania* (2012), and *ParaNorman* (2012). These films not only raise questions about children and childhood, but also specifically engage in the generic conventions of horror through various monsters, use of comedy, gender stereotypes, and generic hybridity. By engaging in conversations with the conventions of horror films, children's animated horror film legitimates its status as a horror subgenre, not merely simple children's films.

## **CHAPTER 1: PUTTING THE CHILD IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILM**

In the first chapter, I will examine the role of children in children's animated horror film. Many other types of children's animated films do not contain actual children as the main protagonist, but rather adolescent or adult characters, in both human or anthropomorphized form. Iris Shepard argues that children films, specifically Pixar films, "contain very few depictions of child protagonists navigating the precarious terrain of childhood" (170). Yet children's animated horror films have an even mix of adult and children protagonists with some of the most critically acclaimed films starring children protagonist. The prominence of children protagonist in this subgenre is remarkable considering the emphasis our culture places on the innocence of childhood. News and media coverage increasingly showcases a world in which children can and

indeed do perform harmful acts. Kathryn Bond Stockton argues that one of the “paradoxes of childhood studies” is that while “children are deemed more vulnerable by their guardians . . . they are constructed as more problematic, as presenting adults with more and newer problems, even dangers to face” (37). Despite the new threat posed by children, the Romantic myth of childhood innocence is still pervasive in current culture. Bond Stockton contends, “experience is still hard to square with innocence, making depictions of streetwise children, who are often neither white nor middle-class, hard to square with ‘children’” (32). Children protagonist in children’s animated horror film are often white and do perform aggressive acts; however, I argue that in order to maintain the innocence of the child, all of the violent deeds are performed in order to save friends, family, and even whole communities. Therefore, acts such as blowing up houses and physical assaults do not rid the child of innocence, but rather endow the child with altruistic attributes. Furthermore, it is imperative to look at children protagonists in animated horror and compare them to their live-action counterparts. The horror films of the 1970s are rife with the fear of children and the monstrous process of birth. The combination of childhood and somatic violence is rare in horror; however, the live-action horror films of the 1970s embrace the horror in childhood by making children like Regan (*The Exorcist*) Michael Meyers (*Halloween*), and Damien (*The Omen*) into victimizers. I argue that children’s animated horror film has children performing harmful acts, but not in the same way as live-action horror. Instead of having children protagonists as the victimizers, children’s animated horror allows children to perform destructive deeds and be deemed saviors, not demons with innocence still preserved.

## **CHAPTER 2: FRANKENSTEIN, VAMPIRES, AND GHOSTS, OH MY! MONSTER TYPES AND FUNCTIONS IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILM**

In the second chapter, I will explore the types of monsters present in children's animated horror film and their impact on the fright (or comedy) factor of the film. While each film hosts a different cast of creatures, the most prevalent types of monsters are either recycled monsters from classic horror films or monsters who have roots in the domestic. Monsters that are recycled from previous movies specifically cater to both children and adult audiences and often are classified as comedies, rather than genuine horror. On the one hand, adult audiences not only recognize the monsters from various media depictions, but also may feel nostalgic toward them. On the other hand, classic monsters can be aesthetically appealing to children, especially in animated form. Moreover, the presence of the canon of Universal monsters teaches children important stock characters in order to be good consumers of horror films as adolescents and adults. Domestic monsters are derived from people and spaces of domestic familiarity and/or comfort, like houses and family. Because the domestic is generally comforting, these monsters can embody complex spaces for fear in children, more so than comedic monster parodies. In this chapter, I will argue that children's animated horror films like *Hotel Transylvania* and *Igor* contain monsters that are comedic and teach generic conventions of horror through recycled monsters and stereotypes, while *Coraline* and *Monster House* create genuine sense of fear by unsettling the norm through use of domestic monsters. Thus, instead of being simple or didactic, these four films engage with mainstream horror elements and can create a genuine sense of both comedy and terror in their audiences.

### CHAPTER 3: IT'S ALIVE . . . AGAIN: CHILDREN'S HORROR FILM AND POSTMODERN TRAITS

For my third chapter, I will examine the ways in which children's animated horror films are engaging with postmodern elements of cinema, especially within the larger genre of horror. Children's animated horror draws heavily on pastiche, defined by Frederic Jameson as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" (17). Children's animated horror films engage with pastiche in order to introduce children to stock characters, as well as entertain adults primarily through nostalgia and inside jokes. Again, due to the blockbuster status of many children's films, pastiche is used to efficiently deal with both children and adult audiences simultaneously.

Another postmodern trait that emerges within this subgenre is generic hybridity. A certain amount of generic hybridity has existed in horror cinema since its inception. For example, Universal's *Dracula* (1931) was released on Valentine's Day and marketed as "The Strangest Love Story of All" (Clarens 58), not on Halloween as a horror film. Furthermore, the 1950s is rife with examples of horror/science fiction films like *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Postmodern horror films play with the endemic generic hybridity within the horror genre, and children's animated horror films are no exception. Children's animated horror films are already a generic hybrid between children's and horror films; however, many of the later films work on combining even more genres like comedy, romance, and science fiction. I argue that films like *9* and *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* use the postmodern trait of generic hybridity to create complex films that cannot simply be categorized as children's film, but rather demand classification in several genres.

Though pastiche is a generic way in which this subgenre participates in postmodernism, children's animated horror films often exhibit the postmodern elements endemic to the larger horror genre, especially those attributes examined by Isabel Cristina Pinedo in her 1997 study "Recreation Terror and the Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film." In her research, Pinedo outlines five characteristics of postmodern horror as opposed to classical horror: "1.) Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world. 2.) Horror transgresses and violates boundaries. 3.) Horror throws into question the validity of rationality. 4.) Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure. 5.) Horror produces a bounded experience of fear" (90). By using and modifying Pinedo's five characteristics of postmodern horror, I argue that children's animated horror films, specifically *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman*, clearly employ the outline postmodern elements, and their use of these characteristics allows for participation within the larger horror genre, freeing this subgenre from simple and didactic viewings.

#### **CHAPTER 4: BOYS OR GHOULS? : GENDER ROLE DIFFERENCES IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILMS**

The focus of chapter four centers on the depiction of gender within children's animated horror film. Popularly, horror is often referred to as a masculine genre. Moreover, the genre seems to naturally create male monsters and female victims. Drawing on the work of Barbara Creed, Linda Williams, Carol J. Clover, Isabel Cristina Pinedo, and Peter Hutchings, I will demonstrate that gender in horror films is far more complex than a binary reflecting sexual difference. While these theories are crucial in exploring gender in horror, children's animated horror needs to be examined in terms of gender's relationship to horror and gender's relationship to children's film. Concepts like spectatorship and female victimization play a far lesser role in children's animated horror not only because of the age of the audience, but also the perceived

age of the characters. In G and PG rated films, the victimization of any child is not permissible. Animated gender studies from scholars like Kiesha Hoerrner and Dawn England provide additional lenses to view gender stereotypes in children's animated horror films by looking at the prosocial and antisocial actions of both male and female characters. Unlike my previous chapters, I will not focus on a specific film(s), but rather examine gender and genre throughout all nine films as a whole. When surveying gender within this subgenre, I will focus on the following four points: the gender of the protagonist, the monsters, the victims, and the sidekicks. In this chapter, I argue that most children's animated horror films reinforce male dominance and activity as well as female passivity. By synthesizing the nine films and examining them as a cohesive subgenre, the stereotypical roles presented in children's horror combine to expose this gendered environment

## CHAPTER 1: PUTTING THE CHILD IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILM

As the introduction momentarily alludes to, defining the child in children's animated horror film remains a problematic task. Cinematic depictions of children and childhood have a history of contradiction between the lived experiences of the child and the portrayal of childhood. While tracing the entire history of the construction of childhood in American culture is beyond the scope of this project, using studies such as Nicholas Sammond's *Babes in Tomorrowland* will reveal a variety of explanations for this incongruity, as well as open up spaces to discuss the role of the child in animated films. While children's animated films, as a whole, have a scarcity of children protagonists, the children's animated horror films that I am examining have four daring children protagonists who simultaneously confirm a Romanticized view of childhood, while also taking actions to counter the constructed image of childhood innocence and the American generic child.

I will examine the four children protagonists in *Monster House* (2006), *Coraline* (2009), *ParaNorman* (2012), and *Frankenweenie* (2012) and demonstrate the ways in which these children reinforce and/or work against the constructed image of childhood innocence. In instances that the children's experiences disparage the image of childhood innocence, the films re-inscribe the subversive acts by justifying them as acts of heroism, not violence. Moreover, I will explore the correlation between parental absence and presence and the effect it has on the children's actions. Accordingly, the children who are active are not labeled monsters, but rather children who are brave and save their families and communities, in lieu of their absent parents. I will also analyze the ways in which each character fits into the mold of the American generic child, as well as the ways they demystify and challenge the constructed nature of the myth.



## **CONSTRUCTING THE CHILD**

In all academic discussions of the child, we must remember, “the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back” (Bond Stockton 5). As we recollect and examine the change of childhood in American culture, it is crucial to remember that it was (and is), in fact, adults who produced the parenting articles, federally funded studies, and advertisements of the twentieth century that help us historically consider the construction of childhood. More important than the formation of actual childhood is the adult construction of childhood through popular culture, media, and academic studies, which remains pervasive today and constitutes the necessity of such subgenres as children’s animated horror film. Because individual adults and organizations of adults such as the MPAA deem that mainstream horror is inappropriate for children, other adult writers, directors, and producers create horror films for the child that they construct, not actual children in the viewing audience.

Prior to the twentieth century, the notion of a distinct childhood within American culture was not pervasive due to the physical labor with which children engaged. According to Vicky Lebeau, “the idea that children are different from adults is fundamental to the modern period” (108). The fact that both children and adults labored on farms and industrial occupations, like textile mills, obscured a clear line between adulthood and childhood. In 1904, Edgar Murphy formed the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) and rallied support from many wealthy patrons. The NCLC began reforming child labor laws at a state level first, and then at a federal level beginning in 1912 with the creation of the U.S. Children’s Bureau. Child labor legislation helped in creating a more distinct line between adulthood and childhood.

Once American culture established childhood as a distinct life stage from adulthood, the opportunity to create the American generic child emerged through empirical studies of social science and the increasing popularity of mass culture. Nicholas Sammond asserts,

The child of the twentieth century is historically unique for two reasons. First, unlike preceding generations it was the object of rigorous empirical study by an organized network of researchers: it was the product of the quantification, validation, and circulation of physical and behavioral norms against which the progress of individual children was to be measured . . . Second, the child of the twentieth century was the first child consumer of mass culture—of dime novels, magazines, movies, radio, and eventually television. By that late 1910s, the child was emerging as the distinct target of advertisers and marketers, a valuable commodity in its own right. (6)

This American generic child superficially obscured sex, class, and race, by advancing a notion of a specific type of child; however, by studying parenting manuals and studies like the Payne Fund Studies it is clear that the generic American child was, indeed, white, middle class, and male.

One of the most important traits of the American generic child was, and still is, innocence, or more importantly the need for adults to maintain the seemingly “natural” innocence of the child. For the first half of the twentieth century, parents, mostly mothers, were trained to be the gatekeepers of their families by monitoring the viewing and reading patterns of their specific children. There was a widespread belief that if children watched inappropriate content, the viewing could lead to an early loss of innocence, and ultimately a failed future for all of America. This assumption led to a national effort to determine the effect of media on childhood. Early studies surveyed the effects of media on the assimilation of immigrants, both adult and children alike; however, the Payne Fund Studies, published between 1933-1935, were among the first attempts to look at media effects specifically for children, regardless of nationality. They “systematically undertook a full and rigorous examination of whether the movies harmed children and thus, by extension, society as a whole” (Wojcik-Andrews 29).

Almost all parts of the studies were released in their own independent volumes; yet, they became popular through summarized articles written by Henry James Forman in *McCall's Magazine* and eventually his monograph, *Our Movie Made Children* (1934). The Payne Fund Studies and Forman's summaries have undergone immense criticism for lack of scientific merit. While the Payne Fund Studies, like most studies on media, came back with inconclusive results, Forman's summaries had a clear bias that media had a negative effect on the behavior of children. Since the publication of Forman's work in a popular, rather than scientific, magazine, his subjective opinion developed into a national "fact" that helped cement children as vulnerable to external stimuli. The rhetoric of the deleterious effects of media on children still pervades popular discourses today, especially regarding violent and/or sexual films and video games.

While the Romantic myth of childhood innocence continues to permeate the depiction of childhood, it stands as one of the queerest aspects in contemporary childhood studies. In her study, *The Queer Child* (2009), Kathryn Bond Stockton advances four models of the queer child: the ghostly gay child, the grown homosexual, the queer child, and the normative child. The ghostly gay child is one who has "clear-cut same-sex preference," but this preference is often only spoken through recollections of childhood (17). The grown homosexual is seen through the retrospection of the ghostly gay child, and is often associated with labels of arrested development. The third queer child is one queered by Freud who is "the not-yet-straight-child who is, nonetheless, a sexual child . . . the Freudian child looks remarkably, threateningly precocious: sexual and aggressive" (27). While all four categories present new and interesting ways to examine childhood, the normative child is most applicable to this project in as much as the normative child is "the child made strange (though appealing) to us by its all important 'innocence'" (30). In the existing model of childhood, one of the major differences between

children and adults is the innocence of children versus the experience of adults. Bond Stockton argues that the reason innocent children are strange is because “they are seen as normative but also not like us [adults], at the same time” (31). The queerness of childhood emerges when the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is theoretically straightforward, yet obscured through the lived actions of living, breathing children.

If we assume that children are innocent, then it means they are simultaneously inexperienced; one symbol of childhood innocence is a lack of sexuality or sexual desire. Lebeau argues sexual knowledge and sexuality are crucial in the distinction between adulthood and childhood “so much so, in fact, that the child who ‘knows’ sex can become the very symbol of a childhood lost” (108). While children’s animated films rarely address childhood sexuality, outside of the compulsory heterosexual coupling signaled by a kiss between child protagonist and a close friend of the opposite sex, American cinema has certainly portrayed some children with sexual desire, as well as sexual objects. While films such as Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1962) intentionally showcase the sexuality of a female child, films that are heralded as the epitome of childhood innocence, such as Shirley Temple’s *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), contain a high level of latent sexual content. Graham Greene was the first critic to openly argue that the appeal of Shirley Temple was not due to her cute, childlike sensibility, but rather her display of adult sexuality. He states in his 1937 review that “Her admirers—middle-aged men and clergymen—respond to her dubious coquetry, to the sight of her well-shaped and desirable little body, packed with enormous vitality, only because the safety curtain of story and dialogue drops between their intelligence and their desire” (234). Greene’s argument not only anticipates Laura Mulvey’s influential 1975 study concerning cinema and the “male gaze,” but also raises questions about childhood sexuality and adult scopophilia. Whereas Shirley Temple was at one time the

embodiment of childhood innocence, Greene's critique credits her role with the creation of sexual desire in an adult audience, and by extension, she stands as a symbol for childhood lost through cinematic gaze. Greene's review echoes Lebeau's sentiment that childhood innocence is lost when sexuality becomes apparent. Whether Temple voluntarily flaunted sexuality at a young age or adults used her as a sexual object of gaze and desire, Greene's 1937 survey worked against her established image as the quintessential innocent American girl by arguing her sexual appeal and maturation on screen.

In addition to sexual experience, demonstrations of violent behavior are another area of experience that signals a loss of childhood innocence. While lawmakers draft legislation to protect the innocence of childhood specifically through rape and child abuse laws, current news coverage shows children not only as victims, which substantiates their innocence and need for protection, but also as perpetrators of violence, which shatters the illusion of a universal innocence for the American generic child. According to Bond-Stockton, children possess a type of "legal strangeness . . . need[ing] protections more than freedoms" (16). Since the 1900s, children have been viewed as incapable or not responsible for committing criminal acts; however, a rise in bullying, gun violence, and school shootings are starting to rework the national assumption of childhood innocence. Joseph Zornado claims that the actions of Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, in 1999, demonstrate the manifest story told to children on a daily basis. Zornado argues that this story concerns the adult/child relationship, which "is the story of hierarchy, buried rage, domination, subjugation, violence, and an all-consuming drive for power, even if it means the destruction of self and other" (xiii). Zornado believes children's stories are a form of adult propaganda that serves to further maintain the tiered

relationship between child and adult (xv). Zornado's assumption, therefore, posits that the genre of children's films is another adult tool to reinforce the hierarchy between adult and child.

The term "growing up" best exemplifies the hierarchical relationship to which Zornado refers. Implicit in this phrase is the idea that children are expected to make a vertical progression from the professedly lower position of childhood to higher status of adulthood. Bond Stockton coined the phrase "growing sideways" to counter the idea of vertical progression and the notion that growth ends when adulthood is achieved. She argues the term "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" (11). The concept of growing sideways not only helps deconstruct the culturally constructed hierarchical relationship between adults and children, but also removes the prerequisite of innocence from childhood. "Growing sideways" creates a space for childhood studies to examine sexuality and violence, as well as actively debunk the myth of the constructed American generic child, which asserts that the innocent child is one who needs to adult protection from premature experience. "Growing sideways" includes the lateral expansion of experience that spans both adulthood and childhood, overcomes the white, middle-class, male generic child and creates spaces to explore childhood in terms of race, class, and gender that is no longer a uniform experience.

## **CHILDREN IN ANIMATED FILMS**

While an abundant amount of attention has centered on media and its effects on living children, children protagonists in animated films designed for children have received little focus. Since protagonists in films serve as a model for behavior in most children's animated films, examining protagonists in this genre illuminates the presence of adult guidance, but the surprising absence of children protagonists. Most of the critically acclaimed and award winning

animated children's films of the past two decades actually have a scarcity of children protagonists, whether in human or anthropomorphized form. Of the thirteen films that have won an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, only one film has a child protagonist that has not entered adolescence, and the film is not made by an American film company, but rather the Japanese animation studio, Studio Ghibli. Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) features ten-year-old Chihiro Ogino who is whisked into a spirit world with her parents and is forced to find a way to free the entire family so they might return to the human world. The other two protagonist types are either fully adult or late adolescents in the process of becoming an adult. Adult protagonists generally are accompanied by a child or a child-like character. For example, Shrek is followed by child-like Donkey who is in need of Shrek's guidance and protection, while Marlin in *Finding Nemo* is on a quest to actually save his titular child, *Nemo*. The entire canon of Disney/Pixar princess films include young, female protagonist who are in their mid to late teens who are entering into adulthood by way of a marriage plot.

Iris Shepard examines the lack of children in children's animated film's, specifically Pixar features. Her analysis examines the monetary reasoning behind Pixar's use of adult protagonists, as well as the relationships between adult protagonists and children characters. Shepard contends "there is a didactical quality in the interactions between adult and children characters. The children characters are developed in accordance with traditional views about childhood" (176-77). Throughout these relationships, the concept of "growing up" is emphasized as the ultimate goal, which is why the experienced adult is there to protect the inexperienced child or child-like figure. Instead of allowing children to "grow sideways" and embrace a variety of experiences, not all of which lead to adulthood, animated films assume the mission of protecting and preserving childhood innocence. This undertaking has created numerous

children's films, which actually center on the adult experience of keeping children safe from outside influences: more aptly, films that ensure that children do not grow up too quickly. Instead of empowering children in the film, many children's animated films empower adults by granting them an active presence to contain children and preserve their innocence by shielding them from experiences that will either not lead to adulthood, or that possibly could lead to a premature entry to adulthood.

### **CHILDREN AND LIVE-ACTION HORROR**

While children's animated films attempt to preserve the innocence of childhood by inserting adults to protect the children characters, live-action films do not have as strong of an allegiance towards that goal, especially in horror films. Because children are viewed as "in process," they stand as a touchstone to the past, as well as a reproductive promise for the future. In the vertical progression model of childhood, children are strongly associated with the future and often cinematically serve as a barometer for cultural feelings towards the future. In the 1970s, American horror films continued to move the monster from foreign lands, as seen in early Universal horror movies and the distant planets with weird alien creatures of the 1950s, to an all too familiar setting: the family. Family horror films of the late 1960s and 1970s serve as a turning point in the cinematic conceptualization of the child in horror. James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) depicts a young girl by a stream. This child is emblematic of ultimate compassion, understanding, and innocence, but is ultimately (though accidentally) killed by the creature, who himself is rather innocent and is constructed as the "child" of Dr. Frankenstein. This young girl will forever stand as an innocent cinematic victim of violence. In earlier horror, children often played minor characters or extras in order to fill out traditional family structures or play innocent victims. Fast forward to 1968 and childhood is depicted as bleaker, if not as



completely demonic. No longer are children the innocent victims by the stream, rather they are the monsters who are to be feared. Unlike children's animated films, American family horror included adults who were powerless to help the children, primarily because the children were the monsters and the adults the victims. *Rosemary's Baby* exemplifies the type of desolate future many Americans felt was in store in the late 1960s; a young, middle-class woman, who is rather naïve and childlike, gives birth not to a healthy child who will be raised in an ideal household and serve to secure the future, but rather the child is the product of satanic rape, and is literally the spawn of Satan. Other films like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976) continue to depict a desolate future through children who are evil. While some critics may argue that Regan from *The Exorcist* is an innocent child who has no control over her actions, the film clearly shows the actions occurring at the hand of a child. The demonic spirit has a face, and that face is one of childhood. Multiple murders and masturbation with a crucifix clearly tarnishes the innocent image of childhood and replaces it with the monstrous.

American horror films are not the only narratives to blur and/or remove the line between child as victim and child as monster. Japanese Horror (J-Horror) characterizes children in a variety of ways. In the 1990s during the economic recession in Japan, children were seen in a complex position of both victim and monster. Karen Lury argues the social context of the 1990s provided the space to transform children into prevalent threats. She posits "the recurring appearance of the child as ghost or demon in these films could be understood as a response to contemporary social anxieties, about childhood and about national identity" (29). Lury contends that the depiction of children in J-Horror specifically, is about national identity, as well as an understanding of "how the world is" (52). With transnational cinema, horror films are not only specific national barometers, but also transnational. A bridge between J-Horror national identity

and American horror films is *The Ring*. Adapted from a novel of the same title, *The Ring* is a 1998 J-Horror film, directed by Hideo Nakata, which quickly became the highest grossing horror film in the history of Japanese cinema. After such critical and commercial success, director Gore Verbinski adapted the J-Horror phenomenon into an American blockbuster, grossing close to \$250 million on a meager \$48 million budget (Box Office Mojo).

The basis of the American film is that there is a cursed video-tape. If one views the tape, then he or she will receive a strange phone call and die in seven days. Rachel Keller, an investigative reporter, looks into the recent death of her niece, Katie, and is led to the cabin where Katie and her friends viewed a tape. Both Rachel and her ex-boyfriend view the tape and make a copy of it. Their search leads them to discover the story of Anna and her adopted daughter, Samara, both of whom are dead. Evidence shows that Anna attempted to kill Samara by suffocating her in a well, but Samara survived for seven days. Everyone, with the exception of Rachel and her son, Aiden, die seven days after viewing the tape. Rachel discovers that the only way to view the tape and escape the curse is to make a copy for someone else to watch, thus perpetrating Samara's cycle of death. While the two films certainly differ in casting, both films demonstrate cultural anxiety around technological development. Though this project focuses specifically on children and American films, it is imperative to remember the effect of globalism on cinema and depictions of childhood as both national and transnational barometers.

## **CHILDREN AND ANIMATED HORROR**

Since the 1970s, live-action horror film and children have developed a complex relationship allowing children to be victims, monsters, a combination of the two, or simply absent altogether. Children's films, as a genre targeted toward children, avoid depicting children either as victims or as monsters. On the one hand, the G or PG rating does not allow much

violence, much less toward children. On the other hand, as Nodelman alludes to in *The Pleasure of Children's Literature*, the subgenre of children's fiction is seen as serving a didactic purpose. To make a child outright monstrous creates an inescapable paradox for filmmakers. To make a child a monster means that either 1) the monstrous child will perform improper actions and posit bad behavior for viewing children to learn or 2) the child must be severely punished (possibly destroyed) in order for good to triumph; however, in the process at least one child, the monster, becomes a victim to violent behavior.

In most animated children's films, the antagonist of the narrative is an adult, not a child. The stereotypical villains are mainly wicked stepmothers, witches, hags or effeminate, power hungry men, whether in human or anthropomorphized form. Shepard identifies three different Pixar films, *Toy Story*, *Toy Story 2*, and *Finding Nemo*, that employ a "demon child" who serves as the story's antagonist, which is a rarity in the genre. Nonetheless, Shepard argues that children are asked to identify with the adults of the narrative, not the "demon child" because "a vast majority of children's stories invite children to identify with the adults' idea of what a child should be (Zornado xv). Even though recent films allow a demon child to be an antagonist, they are never victorious and must be punished either by their parents, by not getting what they want, or by ultimately becoming an unsuccessful adult like Sid Philips from the *Toy Story* trilogy. Furthermore, the "demon child" character is never matched against another child protagonist, but rather an adult. For example, in *Toy Story* Sid does not terrorize Andy himself, but rather his ostensibly adult cowboy and spaceman toys. In *Finding Nemo*, the dentist's niece, Darla, does not terrorize Nemo, primarily because Nemo has a plan for escape, but she does badger the more mature fish in the tank by pounding the sides of the fish tank. With the "demon child," no child stands to be victimized. Ultimately, the "demon child" is not so much monstrous as an example

for the viewing audience of what happens when children do not “identify with the adults’ idea of what a child should be” (Zornoado xv).

As a subgenre, children’s animated horror films truly create a new space of action for children within the larger genres of animated films and live-action horror films. Contrary to live-action horror, children can perform violent actions in children’s animated horror films and not be possessed by demons. Moreover, children’s animated horror films allow children to take actions that would make Pixar’s “demon child” run in fear. For example, while Sid attempts to blow up small toys that he assumes are inanimate, DJ, the protagonist from *Monster House*, literally blows up a living, breathing, walking monster house.

One reason that children protagonists in children’s animated horror films can take much more drastic actions is because they are not antagonists, but rather protagonists. These films remove parents from the main role, and in fact, these parents are often absent either physically or emotionally, allowing the child viewer to identify not with adult protagonists and their need to protect childhood innocence, but rather with a child protagonist himself or herself. This shift is a major advance from other children’s animated films. While adults still produce, review, and consume these films (alone and/or with children), having complex children protagonist moves the genre beyond Pixar’s absent or negative representations of children. Children’s animated horror films provide the space for children to identify with characters who are not only children, but often the combination of victims and perpetrators of violence; the children characters are not passively innocent, but they “grow sideways” through a variety of experiences not designed to propel them into adulthood.

## **DJ : MONSTER HOUSE (2006)**

DJ is the young protagonist of Gil Kenan's 2006 film *Monster House*; he is seemingly trapped between childhood and adolescence as evidenced by his cracking voice, angst, and awakening sexual desire. Though the film depicts DJ in limbo, his decision at the end of the film to embrace the childhood tradition of going "trick-or-treating" for candy, instead of the adolescent traditions of Halloween parties and vandalism, shows that while adolescence is potentially in his near future, he is still a child, at least for the duration of the film.

*Monster House* transforms the traditional haunted house narrative into a monstrous house narrative. While the film opens with DJ safely in his home under the supervision of his parents, it quickly removes parental and home safety by sending the parents out of town and forcing DJ to leave the safety of his house. The crotchety old neighbor, Mr. Nebbercracker, appears to be the villain of this film, demanding that every child stay off his lawn; however, DJ and his friends quickly realize that the monster is the house itself; the house devours not only children's toys, but also any child (or adult) "foolish" enough to enter the property. DJ, his friends Chowder and Jenny, and Mr. Nebbercracker join forces to stop the house, which is animated by the spirit of Mr. Nebbercracker's wife, Constance. Though the kids attempt to enter the house and destroy it by putting out the fire, which symbolizes the heart, the only way to defeat the monster is to demolish it physically.

Compared to other full-length animated features, DJ deviates from normal protagonists primarily in age and activity level. The film undoubtedly places DJ in the realm of childhood on the brink of adolescence. Michael Howarth argues that "at the beginning of the film, DJ is clearly in the final stages of childhood and attempting to cross the border into adolescence" (198).

*Monster House* establishes DJ as a child in process to adolescence by making his markers of

puberty all too apparent. As the film starts, DJ's parents are leaving town for a dental convention. During the instructions and goodbyes, DJ's parents note, "his [DJ's] voice sounds funny, someone's going through puberty." Momentarily, DJ looks confused, but waves goodbye to his parents. When his teenaged babysitter, Zee, asks why he is acting strange, DJ responds with confidence that he is, "having lots of puberty." While DJ clearly exhibits the signs of beginning puberty, he is not exactly sure what puberty means as denoted by his confusion and his phrasing that he has "lots of puberty." Even in his process into adolescence, DJ has the understanding of a child going through a transition, not a teenager or adult.

There are moments, however, that DJ shows progression into adolescence. For instance, DJ displays some stereotypical resistance to authority, sexual interest in a neighborhood girl, Jenny, and heterosexual competition with his lifelong friend, Chowder. This journey into adolescence is not linear and is problematized by the way DJ clings to childhood. DJ's room is a shrine to his childhood, encompassed in childish posters and stuffed animals, including his favorite stuffed bunny. He explains the state of his room to Jenny as in the process of being renovated. After a nightmare that cements that there is, indeed, a monster house, DJ awakes and grabs his stuffed rabbit for comfort. In a way, he sees what items make his room childish, but he simultaneously keeps those same items in his room; retaining these items is a symbol that DJ is still a child, though fully exhibiting behaviors and emotions associated with adolescence.

DJ serves as an example of a childhood that does not have a linear progression, but rather oscillates between stages with no definite vertical progression; he problematizes the idea of growing up. Howarth insists that "the transition from childhood to adolescence is not sudden; it is gradual and often disrupted with spurts of doubt and helplessness" (207). Most animated films depict children as victims of circumstance and in need of adult assistance to return to normalcy

or even to achieve a “happily ever after.” Conversely, *Monster House* posits a child protagonist who needs help, but that help comes from other children, not adults. One of the most innovative aspects of this film is creating helpless adults and empowered children. *USA Today* film critic, Scott Bowles, states, “the movie [*Monster House*] treats children with respect.” Instead of creating dependent children, the film empowers children, especially through the absence of adult characters. *DJ*’s parents leave within the first ten minutes of the film, and Mr. Nebbercracker suffers a heart attack and is also gone for a majority of the film. While we know nothing about Jenny’s parents, except they are absent, Chowder reveals the dysfunction of his own family by stating, “my dad is at the pharmacy, and my mom is at the movies with her personal trainer,” indicating a complete lack of parental involvement in his life. DJ, Chowder, and Jenny attempt to turn to the only other adults in the film, two male police officers, for help with the monster. Because it is Halloween, the officers do not believe the children. After some convincing, the officers jokingly examine the house, only to be devoured by it, proving that adults are helpless in stopping the monster, and that the children must solve the problem by themselves. In the trailer to the movie, DJ’s mom tells him “If anything happens, call the police and hide in your closet,” to which the dad responds, “He already knows that.” DJ has been taught by his parents and his community that adults have the power to solve problems; however, after exercising all adult options, the trio of children must take matters into their own hands. In a play on childhood whimsy and ingenuity, the children enter the house with guns: water guns. Using basic 4<sup>th</sup> grade science lessons, the children navigate the house and obtain information. When they realize there is no easy escape from the house, they use the water guns to shoot the house’s metaphorical uvula and force the house to vomit the children back to the outside world. Though DJ still needs support, he finds that help through other characters who have not yet “grown-up”. *Monster*

*House* reverses the adult/child hierarchy that Zornado condemns and allows children to maintain and exercise power, while adults have no presence or power over the unleashed terror.

Not only does *Monster House* overturn the hierarchy sustained in most animated films, it also demystifies the long held concept of the American generic child and childhood innocence. In order to debunk the myth of the American generic child, the film presents three unique characters, each of whom serves as a foil for the other child characters. DJ is the main protagonist, but unlike other films, he is accompanied by other children, not adults or animal figures. None of the three children is like any of the others; in fact, according to their behaviors, the three children are potentially at different developmental stages. Jenny is overachieving, cunning, and the most intelligent of the three. She easily solves problems, and at first mistakes the two boys as developmentally challenged. She is the first child to make a physical, sexual advance by kissing DJ on the lips. On the other hand, DJ grapples with finding himself between childhood and adulthood, often trying to act more mature than he actually is in order to woo Jenny. Lastly, Chowder is characterized by his childish desire to trick-or-treat, his red cape, and his cowardice, which often signals his need for help by others. All three children are different, but what they share in common is their status as children. Though *Monster House* could have taken more steps to discredit the generic child by having more racial and class diversity, the film takes important steps in de-universalizing the childhood experience by depicting childhood as a spectrum of lived actions, not a universal experience.

In addition to demystifying the American generic child, *Monster House* also challenges the long-standing belief of inherent childhood innocence. DJ and his friends perform actions that are far from innocent; however, the film contextualizes these “inappropriate behaviors” as heroic, and therefore, allows DJ to maintain his innocence, and also to gain the status of hero by



personally giving Mr. Nebbercracker back his freedom, as well as ridding the town of a destructive monster house. If analyzed as separate incidences, DJ's actions would be classified as deviant, destructive behavior; many of them break laws. Though the film contextualizes these actions as innocent, examining them allows childhood to be seen as an active period, which does not always lead to growing up, as opposed to an inactive and innocent time marked by inexperience.

After DJ's parents leave town, his "rap sheet" grows to criminal proportions. In an attempt to help Chowder retrieve his beloved basketball, DJ trespasses on private property, clearly ignoring the posted signs and history of verbal warnings. After DJ confronts the owner, Mr. Nebbercracker, the elderly man has a heart attack, which DJ assumes responsibility for because of his trespassing. After the house proves to be the monster, not Mr. Nebbercracker, the kids attempt to destroy the monster by unlawfully entering Nebbercracker's house and damaging some of the private property inside the house. Ultimately with the permission of Mr. Nebbercracker, DJ uses some high grade explosive and literally demolishes the house, which embodies the soul of a marginalized woman, leaving mere remnants of the structure. When examined separately, these incidences seem like deviant behavior, which certainly would not be considered the paradigm of proper childhood behavior. Conversely, most parents would be appalled if their children acted in this manner. This film would not exemplify the propaganda that Zornado accuses most children's narratives to be, but it serves as a space for the children protagonist to take action and ultimately retain power.

Ultimately, at the end of the film, DJ chooses to remain a child for a bit longer; he actively resists growing up, even after all of the experiences he encounters during the film. At the beginning of the film, Chowder mentions trick-or-treating, and DJ responds, "Maybe I'm getting

too grown-up.” By the end of the film, both DJ and Chowder happily decide to go trick-or-treating, signaling that maybe they are not quite grown-up yet. Howarth contends “they [DJ and Chowder] are progressing into adolescence, but they have not yet shed all of their childish thoughts and ideas” (207). This film is less about maturation than the experiences of childhood. *Monster House* suggests that childhood has value in and of itself, with goals other than simply progressing through the childhood stage onto higher stages of development. To view this film in terms of progressing into higher forms of adolescence and ultimately adulthood, limits the liberating message of the film that frees childhood from the hierarchy with adulthood. Not only does this film work to demystify the American generic child, but also serves as a demonstration of a child “growing sideways.” *Monster House* privileges this type of growth by having DJ relegate the progression of growing up as inferior to the experiences of maintaining his childhood; importantly, not all childhood experiences, no matter the epic proportions, lead to vertical progression, nor should these experiences, thoughts, and ideas simply be shed for something societally deemed as better, i.e., adulthood.

### **CORALINE JONES: *CORALINE* (2009)**

Coraline is the spunky female protagonist of Henry Selick’s 2009 horror fantasy *Coraline*, based on Neil Gaiman’s 2002 novel by the same title. Coraline is a modern day Alice, who has her own “rabbit hole” that allows her to travel between her boring, everyday world and a fantasy world full of all of her favorite foods and activities. Unlike *Monster House*, *Coraline* does not depict a young protagonist at a crossroads between childhood and adolescence. Coraline never grapples with adolescent angst, puberty, awakening sexual desires towards the male sidekick, Wybie, or issues of menstruation; rather, she fully submerses herself into a childhood fantasy world in which she gets her every desire, at least in the beginning.

Coraline is a young girl who feels her needs are not being met by her distracted parents. After the family's move to a small, but Gothic looking, apartment, the young girl is presented a doll that looks uncannily like her, and quickly discovers a portal to an alternate world. There, Coraline meets Other Mother and Other Father, who at first glance seem like ideal parents. They give her everything she wants from yummy junk food to individual attention. Other Mother and Other Father encourage Coraline to trade in her human eyes for button eyes, so that she might be able to stay in the other world forever; however, as time progresses, Coraline realizes she does not really want everything she desires and demands to return to her real world. After refusing to receive buttons as eyes and become a permanent resident of the Other World, Coraline tries to escape back to her home, but realizes that she is trapped in the domestic space of the Other World. After she demands freedom, Other Mother is offended and turns into a monstrous arachnid. Eventually, Coraline challenges Other Mother to a game and tricks her into freeing the other ghost children who lost their eyes and souls to Other Mother. She also frees her parents, who Other Mother traps in a souvenir snow globe. Coraline returns to the normal world and appreciates her parents, even though they are imperfect.

Coraline, like DJ, is unlike most other cinematic animated protagonists because she is firmly and contently within the developmental stages of childhood. There is no question about her status as a child because she is clearly not an adolescent or adult, nor does she ever express a desire to become either. Furthermore, the entire film depicts a child's fantasyland full of wonder and enchantment. Film critic Dana Stevens contends that this film is full of childhood longing, which eventually turns into "a routine escape-from-the-bad-guy adventure." The types of longings Coraline has are quintessentially childlike in nature. Instead of eating the boring food that her parents can cook and afford in the real world, Coraline favors the gourmet sweet treats

and junk food of Other Mother. Additionally, Coraline wants to fill her day with adventure, not boring, old, has-been neighbors or absentee parents, a point that I will return to briefly. In the other world, Coraline attends performances of great European thespians and The Great Bobinsky's mice circus. In the real world, Coraline must deal with entertaining herself or going school clothes shopping for a uniform that forces her into conformity with the rest of the class. In the Other World, Coraline is constantly entertained and even clothed in unique fashion that seems to please her.

Once again, the absence of parents in this film signals a challenge to the adult/child hierarchy apparent in many children's narratives. *Coraline* is unique in the fact that there is not only one set of parents, but two, and neither set of parents are truly present despite their physical presence. First, I will examine the absence of real mother and father, followed by other mother and other father. The absence of both sets of parents creates a space for Coraline to solve her own problems with no adult help and only minimal outside help by way of Wymie and the black cat.

While the film opens with Coraline and her parents moving, it becomes obvious that Coraline's mother and father are far too preoccupied to be mentally or emotionally present for her. After all the moving boxes are in the house and Coraline is ready to begin her life in her new apartment, she tries to engage her mother in a conversation and possibly a new adventure. Her mother responds with an abrupt and bothered "Coraline, I don't have time for you right now." After Coraline notices a small door in the wall, which we later learn is the portal to the other world, she begs her mother for a key. After a bit of persistence, Coraline's mother responds with an exasperated "Will you stop pestering me if I do this for you?" In addition to Coraline's clearly absent mother, her father is equally mentally and emotionally absent. After begging her dad to

join her in seeking new adventures, Coraline's dad responds with the preoccupied phrase "Just let me work," and he later gives her the dull, repetitive, and unnecessary task of counting ceiling tiles in the house. Both parents are more concerned with creating their gardening catalogue and finishing their work project than being mentally and emotionally present for Coraline. *San Francisco Gate* film critic Mike LaSalle contends that "Coraline has a mother who isn't there and a father who has checked out long ago. Both are buried in work. This is a portrait of the American family that many children will recognize, much to the embarrassment of their parents." This type of parental absenteeism is not only visible in media, but also creates the space for a shared experience between Coraline and the younger viewing audience.

These forms of absences create the childhood longing in Coraline for parents who are more attentive to her needs, and the Other World fills the void of her parents through the roles of Other Mother and Other Father. Instead of being absent, both of these figures are all too present. They greet Coraline with a smile and warmth unmatched by her real parents. They make sure that Coraline gets every desire of her heart, including delicious food, fun adventures, live performances, a garden, a song written about her, and cool, trendy clothes. They seem present; however, they are not parents, but rather creations of the Other Mother, also referred to as Beldam. While the novel and film do not give much information on Beldam, she assumes female form, is of old age, and has the ability to morph into a variety of human and non-human forms. She assumes the appearance of a specific mother in order to lure particular children into the other world, but she is not the mother of any of the captured children. Other Father is simply a creation of Beldam to help complete the nuclear family dynamics, not an actual parent, and he is completely controlled by her, even to the point that he attempts to harm Coraline in the end of the film because Other Mother forces him.

The variety of parental absences creates a space for Coraline to be an active participant in this narrative. *New York Times* film critic, A.O. Scott, posits, “Mr. Selick [the director] is interested in childhood not as a condition of sentimentalized, passive innocence but rather as an active, seething state of receptivity in which consciousness itself is a site of wondrous, at times unbearable drama.” Coraline’s actions, indeed, are far from virtuous and cannot strictly be viewed in the trajectory of her “growing up.” Coraline’s absent parents, in some respect, allow her to act in ways that society deems inappropriate, while maintaining a childish sense of mischief, not misbehavior. Because the film is from Coraline’s perspective, not an adult point-of-view, we can identify a level of parental neglect, which creates Coraline as a sympathetic character who takes actions to escape the loneliness of her everyday life. In most situations, her behavior would be deemed a misbehavior and ultimately punished. For example, Coraline regularly argues with her parents, and eventually directly disobeys them in order to travel to the Other World, which makes her a runaway child.

Coraline’s most active moments, however, occur in the Other World. At first, it appears that she is finally getting to enjoy the pleasures and indulgences of childhood. Instead of being neglected, her other parents serve her every need including food, friendship, and entertainment. Everything Coraline desires, she literally receives in the Other World; however, within the course of three visits, Coraline realizes that in order to maintain this type of paradise, she must literally sacrifice herself, metonymically through her eyes. In order to return to normalcy, Coraline must help release the soul’s of other children by finding their eyes. In order to do this, Coraline has to literally destroy her neighbors in other world. Though the audience knows that the neighbors are mere creations of Other Mother, they have human faces throughout a majority of the film and Coraline takes actions against them, which ultimately ends their existence. Once

again, Coraline's actions are justified by labeling them feats of heroism. She does not defeat Other Mother through the demise of her neighbors for herself, but rather to free the souls of the ghost children, as well as freeing her parents from the trap Other Mother set for them.

Coraline is an exemplary model of a child protagonist whose experiences do not necessarily lead to vertical progression, but rather sideways growth. At the end of the film, Coraline does not exhibit obvious signs of maturation or adult behavior. While she discernably appreciates her real world to a greater degree, her parents are the characters who actually undergo a dramatic transformation. Coraline's parents "grow down," while Coraline remains a consistent character throughout the entirety of the film. Instead of being preoccupied with work, Coraline's parents welcome Coraline back to the real world with a smile, hug, and a bag of fresh groceries. They interact with Coraline in a manner that strikes a balance between parents and other parents. While they seem to be entirely different characters, Coraline remains the same adventurous spirit. Though she experiences a wide range of behaviors including running away and learning adult lessons like "nothing is ever free," Coraline is still childlike; she uses her experiences to stay in childhood, instead of employing them as catalysts into adulthood. Instead of the adults in the film holding the power to teach Coraline what to become, Coraline teaches the adults what they should be. This role reversal helps deconstruct the adult/child hierarchy by creating a world in which adults can do wrong and children can teach important lessons, without becoming adults themselves.

Not only does *Coraline* help reverse the adult/child hierarchy by allowing a child character to actively grow sideways, it also helps demythologize the American generic child. Unlike most animated films, including children's animated horror films, Coraline stands in the great minority of animated, female, child protagonists (a point which I will examine further in

chapter three). Additionally, Coraline does not enjoy the privileges of a middle-class family. We are not given a look at Coraline's family paycheck, but the disrepair of the rented apartment, the lack of fresh food, and the concern with prices while clothes shopping indicate a family who does not belong to the middle-class. After they finish the seed catalog, Coraline's parents purchase more food and seem happier. The typical American middle-class family does not live from project to project, but instead procures its consumption habits through a stable source of salary and the ability to get lines of credit. Since the American generic child is male, middle class, and white, Coraline's status as the protagonist truly challenges the visual and behavioral aspects of the sentimentalized mythical child. She is a lower class, female, and while she is raced white, she does not look like a stereotypical white female child. Not only are Coraline's facial features sharp and pointed, unlike American sweethearts like Shirley Temple, her hair is a startling and unnatural shade of blue cut in an uneven bob. Coraline queers existing images of childhood through her active process of growing sideways, her deconstruction of the American generic child, as well as her inability to behave innocently. While the film contextualizes Coraline's "misbehaviors" in terms of neglect and heroism, she continues to stand out from other animated children protagonists because of her resistance to both the images of childhood and the pressure to grow up.

#### **NORMAN BABCOCK: *PARANORMAN* (2012)**

Norman Babcock is the eleven-year-old protagonist in Sam Fell and Chris Butler's 2012 critical success, *ParaNorman*. Unlike the other protagonists in this chapter, Norman is undeniably labeled as a queer child because of his ability to communicate with the dead. The title of the film itself indicates that Norman is not normal. The title of the film replaces the typical horror film name "paranormal" with *ParaNorman*. His special abilities make him non-



normative, even from other animated horror protagonist. Norman, himself, is not marked by physical activeness, like DJ or Coraline, and does not seem to do anything that breaks the rules, other than speak to dead. Norman challenges stereotypical childhood by performing tasks that many adults label impossible. While he fits the American generic child stereotype for the most part, the concept of childhood innocence is brought into question not by how Norman acts, but by how Norman is acted upon by his peers. Issues such as childhood bullying call into question childhood innocence by making children suffer at the hands of other children, as well as adults. By examining Norman, his obese friend Neil, and his archaic witch foil, Agatha, childhood innocence is problematized, and the myth of the American generic child is brought into question by queering the stereotypical face of said myth.

*ParaNorman* begins with a routine interaction between Norman and his grandmother while watching a zombie movie; however, soon the film reveals that Norman's grandmother is dead, and Norman is a medium with the ability to communicate with dead people and animals in the community. Upon Norman's arrival at school, he becomes a victim of school bullying before he makes his only friend, Neil, who is fascinated with Norman's special talent. During a school play rehearsal, Norman has a vision about the history of his town. Later during his performance, Norman has another apparition, which is followed by a physical and visual disruption from Norman warning the town the dead will be coming back to life. The next day at school, the spirit of Norman's uncle approaches him in the bathroom and tasks him with the ritual of keeping the witches curse at bay. After Norman accepts the challenge, the film's adventures start, and Norman attempts to keep the town safe; however, he is unable to complete the ritual before sundown and a host of old colonial zombies emerge and chase Norman and the school bully, Alvin through the town. Eventually Norman's sister, Courtney, Neil and his brother, Mitch,

arrive and to try to save Norman. While the town mob seemingly takes care of the zombies, Norman personally confronts Agatha, the witch, and soon discovers that Agatha was a scared young girl who was wrongly persecuted when they town assumed she was a witch, when in fact she was a misunderstood medium, like Norman. After Norman emphasizes to Agatha that she has become a victimizer, not a victim of wrongful accusations, she reconciles with the town, the reign of the witch's curse is over, and Norman becomes the savior of his community.

Norman achieves his journey from social outcast to community hero almost single handedly. There are four main characters that attempt to help Norman out of the paranormal situation without necessarily resolving the conflict: Neil, Alvin, Courtney, and Mitch. Both Norman and Neil are in childhood, while Alvin seems to oscillate between childhood and adolescence. Courtney and Mitch are both older siblings and are fully in adolescence marked by dating relationships, driving, and high school drama. Of this core set of five people, Norman and Neil, the children, believe in Norman's ability and take the threat of zombies and witches seriously, while the older characters remain skeptical until Mitch is literally holding the disembodied head of a zombie. Between the other characters' disbelief and sheer terror, no one helps Norman find the witch's grave or eventually resolve the curse.

Norman's parental interactions are far different than DJ's and Coraline's; his parents not only make an appearance in the film, but the film suggests they are an active part of his life. While Norman's mom, Sandra, supports Norman, she does not seem convinced that he can actually see and communicate with the dead. She often offers advice and a listening ear, but always sides with Norman's father, Perry, who not only denies the possibility of talking to the dead, but also chastises Norman and attempts to force him into conformity with his peers. The film begins with Perry asking Norman why he cannot be similar to other kids and enjoy outdoor

adventures, like camping. When Norman acts out during his play performance, Perry becomes infuriated at Norman's non-normative behavior and actually punishes him for being different. After the punishment, both parents leave Norman at home under the supervision of Courtney and leave to a non-disclosed location. After their departure, Norman escapes his house and starts on the main part of the adventure. His parents' absence allows Norman to address zombies and the witch unhindered and ultimately resolve the town's conflict. While Norman's parents are there physically, mentally, and emotionally for most of the film, they do not accept his talent, and this dissension forces Norman to work independently from his parents, until they ultimately realize that Norman's talent is legitimate and the family becomes a fused and functioning unit again at the end of the film.

*ParaNorman* complicates issues of childhood innocence and victimization through its children characters: Norman, Agatha, and Neil. On the one hand, children are victims in *ParaNorman* at the hands of misunderstanding adults and classmates. On the other hand, children are also perpetrators of violent acts through bullying. Norman does not perform illegal actions in order to save his community; he illuminates other's cruelty and violent acts in order to create change. This film is unique in the way it challenges myths of childhood innocence compared to other children's animated horror films. Instead of having protagonist actively commit violent acts against a declared monster, Norman actively discusses violent acts in order to dissipate the effect of the "monster." In his conversation with Agatha, Norman emphasizes the problematic categorization of a child as an innocent victim who needs protecting and a victimizer who can also be a child; this conversation posits that the categories do not always function independently, but can be recursive.

NORMAN: A - a little girl who was different... Who was different from the other people in her village.

AGGIE: I'm not listening! La la la la la...

NORMAN: She could see and - and do things that no one could understand! And that made them scared of her!

AGGIE: I don't like this story!

NORMAN: She turned away from everyone and became sad and lonely, and had no one to turn to!

AGGIE: STOP IT.

NORMAN: The more she turned away from people, the more scared they were of her. And they did something terrible! They became so scared that they took her away and they killed her!

AGGIE: NO.

NORMAN: And even - and even though she was dead, something in her came back!

AGGIE: STOP.

NORMAN: And this part of her, wouldn't go away even after three hundred years!

AGGIE: SHUT UP.

NORMAN: And the longer it stayed, the less there was of the little girl.

AGGIE: I'll make you suffer!

NORMAN: Why?

AGGIE: Because... Because...

NORMAN: Because you want everyone to hurt just as much as you are. So whenever you wake up, you play this mean game, but you don't play fair!

AGGIE: They hurt me!

NORMAN: So you hurt them back?

AGGIE: I wanted everyone to see how rotten they were!

NORMAN: You're just like them, Agatha!

AGGIE: No, I'm not!

After this conversation, Agatha realizes that she is just as guilty as her persecutors and decides to change how she interacts with the community. Norman's speech provides Agatha the freedom to be seen as a misunderstood and victimized child, and eventually releases her spirit because she no longer has unfinished business. Consequently, the town no longer has to fear the witch's curse, and everyone is free to continue to live in the community without fear.

Because of the wide-reaching power of Agatha, she seems like the most destructive child in the film; however, *ParaNorman* addresses issues of bullying beyond how Agatha bullies the town. Alvin is the stereotypical school bully, who not only torments Norman because he is medium, but also physically punches Neil and teases him about his weight. In the past decade, bullying has become a national concern with a focus on physical bullying, as well as cyber bullying. There is clearly national attention through organizations like the PACER center, National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), and the website [StopBullying.gov](http://StopBullying.gov). *ParaNorman* not only responds the trend in horror, but also the grim reality that children can be some of the worse perpetrators of physical and emotional abuse against their peers. By demonizing bullying and exonerating those who are bullied, the film clearly depicts one type of monster as a child who violates other children, which in turn demythologizes childhood innocence, not through the actions of Norman, but rather by the actions *against* Norman.

Norman also challenges the created state of the American generic child; superficially, he is the quintessential American generic child. He is male, white, and not lower class, though we do not know his family's exact income level. While he has stylized hair, which differentiates him from other classmates, he does not look weird. At first, he does not seem to challenge the archetype, but rather confirm it; however, because Norman does not behave in a normal manner, he queers the entire archetype by proving that even model children in appearance do not act in accordance to the values imparted in the American generic child. Instead of revolutionizing his look, the film creates a protagonist who looks the part, but does not act the part. Queer childhood has the face of the American generic child, which allows this constructed state of childhood to be interrogated and repudiated.

#### **VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: *FRANKENWEENIE* (2012)**

Our final child protagonist in children's animated horror film is Victor Frankenstein from Tim Burton's 2012 *Frankenweenie*. This film enters into a cinematic dialogue with Universal monster films of the 1930s, most notably Whales' 1931 *Frankenstein*. Victor Frankenstein, the film's protagonist, is an innocent, child version of the "mad-scientist" Victor Frankenstein, and his beloved pet Sparky, mirrors Frankenstein's pieced-together, misunderstood creature. The secondary cast of characters who attend New Holland Elementary school are also modeled Universal films, especially *Frankenstein*. Nassor, a young boy, resembles Karloff's representation of Frankenstein's creature, while young Edgar Gore (E. Gore), mimics the mad-scientist's hunchback assistant, Fritz. In a sense, *Frankenweenie* establishes American horror films in general as the "children" of the original *Frankenstein*, by including later horror allusion characters such as Toshiaki, a generic Asian who mimics the Japanese characters in *Godzilla*, as well as Weird Girl, who resembles the twin girls from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. Disney

clearly appropriates the Universal tradition and creates a film, which has been cited as a child's version of *Frankenstein*.

From the outset of the film, Victor is the town's outcast who does not socially fit in with his peers, despite the fact his peers are far from normal suburban children. Though Victor is a social outcast, he fits the mold of the American generic child and rarely performs actions that question that stereotype or that of childhood innocence. While Victor challenges the very limits of science and what constitutes life, which ultimately leads to a community disaster, he does so with the innocence of a child; he does not want to create a hoard of Universal monster look-alikes, but rather bring back his beloved family pet. Victor attempts to restore his community to normalcy, but does not personally do harm to any of the monsters and actually falls victim to the hybrid cat/bat monster at the end of the film, resulting in his need to be rescued. Victor does not stand as a challenge to stereotypical childhood; he represents this myth almost perfectly, in true Disney style.

In the film, Victor Frankenstein is a young boy with a passion for science, filmmaking, and his dog Sparky. At his dad's insistence, Victor tries to play baseball with a local team so that he might later enter the science fair, his true passion. After Victor hits the ball, his beloved pet chases the ball, and consequently is hit by an oncoming car. This misfortune creates the opportunity for Victor to apply his scientific knowledge regarding electricity and eventually reanimate Sparky. Once his science classmates discover Victor's action, they all attempt to resurrect their dead childhood pets, wreaking havoc on the town of New Holland during its annual festival. The film ends with the destruction of all of the reanimated pets, except Sparky, whom the town chooses to revive once more.

Victor appears to be the shining example of the American generic child in gender, race, and class. He is a young, white boy who lives in a suburban neighborhood of cookie cutter houses and perfectly manicured lawns. Despite how well Victor fits the stereotype, he is labeled as a community outcast by his peers, father, and neighbors. *Star Tribune* critic Colin Covert claims, “Frankenstein's monster was misunderstood, childish, sympathetic, an involuntary outcast who simply wanted to be loved. So is Sparky[and] his spindly master Victor . . . .” Victor’s status as an outsider grants him space to reanimate Sparky alone, since he does not have a science fair partner to help or impede the process. Victor proves himself competent by the fact that he successfully revives Sparky to the cute and cuddly dog he once was, although slightly more patch-worked than before. The film oddly labels the face of the American generic child as an outsider, while normalizing the other children of the film, who resemble Universal monsters, more than actual children.

The diversity of secondary characters of the film could challenge the notion of the American generic child, especially since these children include male and female characters, as well as at least one non-white child and one racially ambiguous character. However, while Victor is abnormal the other children are normal and marked with a high ambition to win the science fair, even if that means replicating the Victor’s reanimation experiment. Unlike other protagonists in this subgenre, Victor does not enact criminal or negligent actions, which ultimately lead to chaos and then restoration. The normal children in the film re-enact Victor’s project and reanimate monsters instead of beloved pets. Victor innocently executes a science experiment to bring back his best friend, while the other children have ulterior motives and cause havoc. Thus, while the reverse of the normal/outcast dichotomy could challenge the myth of the American generic child by making the normal child the outcast, the film discernibly marks



Victor's actions as innocent and the other children's actions as destructive thus maintaining the bifurcation, not challenging it.

In addition to Victor's allegiance to the American generic child and sentimentalized notions of childhood innocence, *Frankenweenie* is different from other children's animated horror films in the fact that it includes the parents within the narrative. For the majority of the story, Victor's parents are not only present, but active. While the film does not offer an unproblematic version of parenthood, it works to restore the deficiencies and ultimately privilege the nuclear family with parental involvement. At first glance, Victor's father does not fully accept Victor and wishes he participated in normal activities like his peers. In order to make his son conform to standards, he tells Victor that in order to participate in the science fair that Victor must agree to try baseball. So, Victor engages with this All-American pastime in order to enjoy his true interests. Though Victor's father seems unsupportive of Victor and his true passions, both Mr. and Mrs. Frankenstein attend a school meeting to discuss the termination of the science teacher, Mr. Rzykruski. They are the only parents who speak up in his defense and attempt to save his job in order that Victor can continue to take classes from a teacher that he admires. The film uses this school-sanctioned meeting as a way to realign Mr. Frankenstein with Victor's interest; it corrects his actions that override his son's true passions for conformity sake.

The only parental absence of the Frankensteins in the film is when Victor is actually unburying Sparky and reanimating him. In order for Sparky to be alive again, Victor's parents could not be in the scene. So, while Victor is digging the dog up from the grave, presumably, Victor's parents are working, and during the canine revival, his parents are downstairs enjoying a good horror movie date night. Outside of the pet reanimation, Victor's parents are supportive of Victor, mentally, emotionally, and physically. They attend his baseball game, encourage his

filmmaking, console him after the death of his pet, attend school meetings, and eventually help Victor defeat the monsters that disrupt the New Holland festival. While at first they were against the reanimation of Sparky, they admit they were wrong, and welcome the pieced-together pet openly back into their family. The restoration of the town symbolically stands in for the restoration of Victor's nuclear family.

Unlike other children's animated films, the parents are all-too present and they do not allow Victor to take many actions outside of the ordinary, minus the one necessary to the plot. The presence of the adult characters, especially the parents, limits Victor's ability to act like other protagonist, and unfortunately restricts his actions. He is not the active protagonist like DJ, Coraline, or even Norman. Much of the film occurs in house under the supervision of his parents. In *Frankenweenie*, we do not see the community or actions in the space through Victor's eyes, but almost through a third-person adult vision. The chaos that ensues is not so much fantastical as it is dangerous. The final resolution of the film centers on the actions of the adults of the community, not Victor. After Sparky risks his life to save his human companion from the cat/bat hybrid, Mr. Whiskers, the adults of the film band together and use their automobiles to jumpstart Sparky back to life. While Victor is ecstatic about this second resurrection, he did little to actually make it happen. The power structure still heavily privileges the actions of adults, not children.

## CONCLUSION

All four of these children protagonists deal with issues of mythologized innocence, the standard of the American generic child, as well as parental presence versus personal action. A majority of these films work to problematize existing frameworks of constructed childhood. *Frankenweenie* is differentiated by confirming, rather than challenging, romanticized and queer

versions of childhood. For the most part, this difference can be attributed to the film's affiliation with Disney, unlike the other films. Both *Coraline* and *ParaNorman* are produced by the small and relatively new American stop-motion studio, Laika, while *Monster House* is produced by ImageMovers and Amblin Entertainment and distributed by Columbia Pictures. Nicholas Sammond's study *Babes in Tomorrowland* examines the ways in which Disney became the paragon of family-friendly entertainment by investing in and perpetuating the myth of a universal childhood experience, earmarked primarily by innocence and inexperience. Thus, it is not surprising that the singular Disney child protagonist sustains this universal image into the twenty-first century, while the other three protagonists work against the Disney continuance of the American generic child. While *Monster House* and *Coraline* eventually reinscribe the deviant behavior as heroic, *ParaNorman* uses the queer child to question both childhood innocence and the possibility of an existing universal childhood. All three of these films work to challenge the myth of innocence and a shared childhood experience, and are successful to varying degrees. These three films, compared to Disney's *Frankenweenie*, continue to serve as a reminder that while the major corporations and film studios choose not challenge dominant ideology for their own survival and relevance, small studios, especially in children's animated horror films, serve as tools to question the existing childhood mythologies and even take steps to deconstruct this image by allowing children to "grow sideways," instead of growing up.

## **CHAPTER 2: FRANKENSTEIN, VAMPIRES, AND GHOSTS, OH MY! MONSTER TYPES AND FUNCTIONS IN CHILDREN’S ANIMATED HORROR FILM**

There are two principle criticisms raised against children’s animated horror films. One is that the subgenre is not actually horror, but rather comedy. These claims are not completely unwarranted, considering the blockbuster successes of films such as *Hotel Transylvania* (2012), which use tropes of horror but are presented as comedy-packed adventures starring famous Hollywood comedians such as Adam Sandler and Kevin James; however, comedy within horror films is not unique to children’s animated horror films. The horror genre, as a whole, employs a combination of comedy and horror as one of its standard conventions. Noël Carroll argues “one aim for this [horror] genre, it would appear, is to shift moods rapidly—to turn from horror to humor, or vice versa, on a dime” (“Horror and Humor” 145). While mainstream horror employs a shift between horror and comedy, some critics accuse children’s animated horror of not shifting between horror and humor, but rather focusing entirely on elements of comedy. For example, *Hotel Transylvania* does not aim to scare its audiences; however, this film is not indicative of the entire subgenre.

The other criticism that surfaces in film reviews of the subgenre addresses the inappropriate fright factor in present in films such as *Monster House* (2005), *Coraline* (2008), and *ParaNorman* (2012). These reviews warn against frightening content, especially for young children, which draws this subgenre even closer to mainstream horror. Clearly, critics praise or condemn the subgenre of children’s animated horror films for either being too scary or too funny. After examining the nine aforementioned films, the principle determining factor of the presence of too much humor or horror in the subgenre is directly correlated to the type of monster and its function in a specific film. For films that are lambasted as comedy, recycled

Universal monster types work to create humor against expected cinematic outcomes, while scary content derives from monsters that are housed in spaces and roles of domestic security.

The horror or humor of a film is not based on content alone, but rather heavily depends on the atmosphere established by the monster. The content produced by horror and humor is not as diverse as it would first seem. Robert Bloch asserts, “comedy and horror are opposite sides of the same coin . . . Both deal in the grotesque and the unexpected, but in such a fashion as to provoke two entirely different reactions” (146). Additionally, Janet Halfyard contends that horror operates like most other genres and has a generic equivalent in comedy; “both horror and comedy, after all, draw attention to taboo topics, things that disturb us to the point of screaming or laughing” (21). For example, *Coraline* features the dismemberment of Mr. Bobinsky, revealing he is not human, but rather composed of rats. Meanwhile, *Hotel Transylvania* immediately introduces the audience to a dismembered Frankenstein. In general, dismemberment is a taboo topic in American culture. *Coraline*’s use of this concept disturbs the audience, while *Hotel Transylvania*’s use of dismemberment turns a taboo topic into a joke about Frankenstein being terrified of travelling and fire. The content of the films can provoke screams or laughs depending on the atmosphere established by the monster in the film.

In popular discourse, horror is the genre of monsters, so it is not hard to extrapolate that monsters have a pivotal function in children’s animated horror films. First, I will explore the role of the monster in the larger genre of horror. Then, I will begin to define the two dominant types of monsters specifically in children’s animated horror film. While each film hosts a different cast of creatures, the most prevalent types of monsters are either recycled monsters from classic horror films or monsters who have roots in the domestic. Monsters that are recycled from previous movies specifically cater to both children and adult audiences. On the one hand, adult

audiences not only recognize the monsters from various media depictions, but also may feel nostalgic toward them. On the other hand, classic monsters can be aesthetically appealing to children, especially in animated form. Moreover, the presence of Universal monsters teaches children important stock characters in order to be good consumers of horror films and popular culture as adolescents and adults. Domestic monsters, however, have no clear referent and are derived from people and spaces of domestic familiarity and/or comfort, like houses and a heterosexual family structure. Because the domestic is generally comforting, these monsters can embody complex spaces of fear for children because estrangement often follows such surprising defiance of expectations. While recycled monsters are frequently found in comedic children's animated horror, like *Hotel Transylvania* and *Igor* (2008), domestic monsters engender fear by making the familiar monstrous such as the other parents and alternate world in *Coraline* and the literal house as a monster in *Monster House*. Reviewers often categorize children's animated horror films as horror *or* humor; however, films like *ParaNorman* exemplify the use of comedy as a method of dissipating horror, without dissolving it altogether, creating a film that oscillates between horror and humor and reflects mainstream horror's balance of the two genres.

## **MONSTERS IN HORROR FILMS**

Before exploring the application of monsters specifically in children's animated horror film, I must survey the role of the monster in the horror genre in general due to its defining function. Peter Hutchings states, "Monsters abound in horror, and to a certain extent the history of horror cinema is also a history of monsters" (34). Monster types frequently categorize the phases in horror cinema. Early 1930s horror includes non-human monsters with foreign accents in distant lands, such as Frankenstein's creature and Bella Lugosi's Dracula. With the increase in nuclear technology and the start of the Cold War, 1950s horror reflects elements of science

fiction in films such *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). Starting with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), horror switched from foreign and alien monsters to human monsters that were normal in appearance. The teen slashers in the 1970s through the torture porn in the 2000s continue to push the type of horror humans can inflict on other humans; however, while the monsters take human form, films label these humans as monsters due to the harm they inflict. In fact, horror films dehumanize the human monster either by psychological illness or by endowing human monsters with the supernatural power of resurrection and return such as Freddy from *The Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise or Jason Voorhees from *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*. Noël Carroll's definition centralizes the monster in horror; horror does not exist without the presence of at least one monster. He argues that there can be monster fiction that is not horror, but there cannot be horror without a monster. The difference between the literary and cinematic is that horror films use monsters to elicit fear through harmfulness and repulsion in both characters in the film and the viewing audience, while non-horror films contain monsters that do not necessarily aim to create fear.

While monsters clearly create fear through physical presence, monsters also present cognitive threats by unintentionally challenging the bounds of the real. Carroll contends, "They [monsters] are un-natural relative to a culture's conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge...monsters are in a certain sense challenges to the foundations of a culture's way of thinking" (34). The cognitive threat that monsters pose does not lie solely in challenging concepts of the natural, but also offering alternatives to the norm. Hutchings posits,

On the one hand, horror films can be seen to reaffirm social categories by driving out the 'unnatural' monster, but on the other hand the very existence of the

monster reveals that these categories can be breached, that they—for all their apparent ‘naturalness’—are fragile, contingent, vulnerable. In this respect, monsters not only represent threats to the social order but can also offer new possibilities and transformations to that order. (37)

Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui contend that monsters are a tool that society uses to address cultural concerns and crises. In their survey of monster culture, Levina and Bui argue there are three lenses in which to analyze the monster in horror: psychoanalytical, representational, and ontological. All three categories emphasize the cognitive threat present in monsters, more so than their physical threat. They ultimately contend, “there is much at stake in monstrosity as an abject terror, a cultural representation, and a way of being and becoming” (11). In children’s animated horror film, the physical threat of monsters is not always emphasized due to the construct of the innocent child. Children, as victims, rarely appear on screen because, as a society, we strive to protect children from victimization of various kinds; however, on the surface the type of fear presented in children’s animated film is more often physical, than cognitive. Children’s animated films strive to return the fictional world back to normalcy by completely eradicating the threat posed by the monster, as well as the physical monster itself, eventually ending with a “happily-ever-after.” Though, as Robin Wood and Peter Hutchings argue, the monsters offer a transformative potential to the social order whether or not the monster is destroyed and the world once again returns to normalcy. Recycled and domestic monsters in children’s animated horror film demonstrate not only a physical threat, but also offer the potential of something outside of the normal social order for children to consider. Given the fact that all of the films end in a non-threatening way, the potential for change in the social order already exists by the monsters’ mere presence on screen.



## MONSTERS IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILM

In order to examine both subsets of monsters, I must first thoroughly define what I mean by the terms recycled and domestic monsters as they apply to the subgenre of children's animated horror films. I coin the term *recycled monsters* to indicate creatures that appear in canonical horror films, whether by direct or indirect reference. In children's animated horror films, monsters are not recycled from recent subgenres of horror, but more often from 1930s Universal monster movies. The most reused monsters include "Frankenstein" (Frankenstein's creature), Dracula, The Mummy, and Wolf Man. Even though these monsters are over eighty-years-old, "cinema, and to a lesser extent other media, has kept [them] moving, changing, and transforming" (Hutchings 48). *Hotel Transylvania* is a recent example of children's animated horror that recycles Universal monsters, much like the classic *Mad Monster Party* (1967). Instead of creating monsters to be feared, *Hotel Transylvania* recycles Universal monsters for comedic effect. The reason children's animated films recycle classic monsters is because these monsters are non-human, and thus establish a clear line between monsters and humans, unlike the presence of human monsters such as Jason or Norman Bates. Films like *Frankenweenie*, *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit* and *ParaNorman* all recycle famous monsters; however, they do so in a generic application. There is no Frankenstein's creature, Wolf Man, or references to specific zombie films like *Night of the Living Dead*; however, the monsters clearly look, sound, act, and dress like these classic monsters.

Domestic monsters do not have any direct or indirect referent in classic horror films; however, they are incredibly effective in children's animated horror film because of the perception of domestic spaces and relationships as safe. Domestic monsters generally take the form of a parent, especially a mother, or the space of home. After examining recycled monsters

and their connection to comedy, this chapter will focus on the use of the domestic monster in *Monster House* and *Coraline* in order to demonstrate how this subgenre turns spaces of domestic security into fear. In *Monster House*, the monster is literally embodied as a gothic house, including windows as eyes, a door as a mouth, not to mention the memorable light fixture as a uvula. While domestic physical space is central in *Coraline*, the major domestic monster is Other Mother who manipulates physical space and domestic relationships to incite terror in not only *Coraline*, but also the viewing audience. While the alternative world attracts Coraline with Other Mother's maternal affection and perfect fulfillment of wants, Other Mother becomes monstrous when Coraline asserts that Other Mother is in fact not her actual mother. Even though the monstrous transformation of the domestic seems less scary than mainstream, live-action horror films, it still creates fear through one of the foundational aspects of horror: the monster.

## COMEDY AND RECYCLED MONSTERS

Children's animated horror films that are frequently labeled comedy instead of horror often "allude to, rather than actually are, horror—characters, sets, and narratives all borrow ideas from the horror genre (ghosts, living skeletons, lonely mansions, misty graveyards, a betrayed woman returning from the dead to seek justice for her murder) without ever really trying to scare the audience" (Halfyard 24). In order to recycle horror elements, yet still create a movie designed to make an audience laugh, not scream, these films must neutralize the threat posed by monsters in the film. Carroll contends that comedy horror films must "subtract the threatening edge from a monster or deflect our attention from it, and it can be reduced to a clownish, comic butt, still incongruous, but now harmless and, as a result, an appropriate object of laughter" (156). Since the monster creates fear in horror, making a monster that is not feared is the key to creating a comedy that heavily uses horror elements. Carroll states, "In order to transform horror into

laughter, the fearsomeness of the monster—its threat to human life—must be sublimated or hidden from our attention. Then we will laugh where we would otherwise scream” (158). In order to create comedy out of horror conventions, comedic children’s animated horror films must first present themselves as horror and then undercut the feeling of horror by removing the threat associated with the monsters. This process is most obviously demonstrated in *Hotel Transylvania* and *Igor*.

### **HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA (2012)**

Sony Picture Animation’s 2012 blockbuster *Hotel Transylvania* follows the story of Dracula and his daughter Mavis. With Mavis’ 118<sup>th</sup> birthday quickly approaching, Dracula prepares for a monstrous celebration, while Mavis prepares to get to explore the outside world for the first time. Dracula invites all of his friends, which include a host of 1930s and 1940s Universal creatures. During the party preparation, a human, which are seen as monstrous in the monster community discovers the monster hotel. In a panic, Dracula attempts to hide the human by disguising him as another creature, Johnnystein. Johnny updates Mavis’ birthday party to a hipper and cooler event. He eventually falls in love with Mavis, but is forced to leave the hotel because of Dracula’s over-protective nature. Once Dracula realizes he has hurt Mavis’ “true love” relationship, he confronts the human world with his monster companions and the film ends with a celebration and, of course, true love’s kiss.

*Hotel Transylvania* achieves its comedic effect by not only presenting non-threatening, recycled monsters, but also by offering alternative monsters: humankind. Even though there are two sets of monsters, recycled and human, neither one poses a threat, thus allowing the film to take the form of comedy, rather than horror. The primary key to making comedic, non-threatening monsters in the film is to humanize recycled Universal monster tropes. Throughout

the film, we meet Dracula, the single father who suffered the tragic murder of his wife and is trying to raise his daughter in a safe, protective environment. The film opens with ominous horror music and the appearance of Dracula's shadow that resembles Nosferatu leaning over a crib. Instead of kidnapping or biting the child, Dracula comes into focus and with a smile utters the phrase "peek-a-boo." When the child begins to cry, he quickly comforts her, and the audience discovers that Dracula is not the monster horror cinema has depicted him as, but rather a single dad of an infant. Instead of seeing Dracula in the same monstrous and dehumanizing manner, as depicted in 1931, we encounter Dracula as a diaper changing, bedtime reading, over-protective father.

The film's opening sets the tone for how all recycled Universal monsters should be received: misunderstood creatures that act and live like humans. The directors' note in the film commentary that the opening of the film changed from discussing the tragic loss of Martha, Dracula's wife, because it did not create the right effect to establish the film as a comedy based on horror tropes. The film would not have been comedic if it opened with Dracula being a responsible, single parent or a grieving widower. The comedy of the opening is echoed when the cast of Universal creatures enters the hotel for the first time. Despite the gothic music and interior decoration, the audience quickly discovers that Frank the Frankenstein creature is a devoted husband who is arsonphobic. Wayne the Wolf Man is an overwhelmed father with more than twenty werewolf pups who run wild and do not respect him. Like any parent, Wolf Man has sleepless nights and is regularly disciplining his ill-behaved children. Both Murray the Mummy and Griffin the Invisible Man do not have families, but rather serve as the slapstick comedic bachelors of the film. Most of their actions revolve around physical or emotional teasing and flatulence. The film quickly features many other characters introduced in monster movies such a

Quasimodo and Gremlins. By making the monsters in the film play either domestic roles or slapstick characters, the film removes any threat from these famous recycled monsters and comedy ensues.

In addition to contextualizing these canonical monsters within family structures, the film actively attempts to humanize the monsters by portraying their actions during recreational activities. At first, Dracula hires zombie Bach and zombie Mozart to play at Mavis' 118<sup>th</sup> birthday party; however, the outdated music is quickly replaced with a more modern band composed of Frank, Wayne, and Murray. Throughout the film, the band plays a compilation of hip original songs such as "The Zing", as well as current hits such as LMFAO's "Sexy and I Know It." The casting of both Andy Samberg from The Lonely Island group and Selena Gomez lend an upbeat, pop sound to the film, which is reminiscent of music that is actually popular today, not just the sound of 1930s horror movies, much of which was derived from classical sources such as Bach and Mozart. The monster band sounds human because they create music that mirrors styles that are currently popular. Moreover, the monsters in the film play group games like charades and have conversations while hanging out in a sauna after a long day. By having monsters that not only have the same family structure as humans, but also participate in human activities thoroughly remove the threat of violence from the characters who take on monster form because they appear to be humans wearing monster masks, much like Halloween.

The converse of humanizing monsters is creating humans who are the monsters. This is not a unique attribute of *Hotel Transylvania*. From small screen hits like Disney's *Halloweentown* quadrilogy to Pixar's *Monster's Inc.*, other films have explored the issue of having a normal monster world and a monstrous human world. In fact, much of *Monster's Inc.*'s popularity stems from its status as the first mainstream animated film to parody the horror genre

in this way. *Hotel Transylvania* begins with the premise that all humans are monsters and ultimately through interactions with actual people concludes that they are not actually monstrous. A majority of the film requires the bifurcation of the monsters and humans and dedicates a majority of screen time to the idea of monstrous humans. The main reason for constructing the hotel is to create a safe haven for monsters. After persecution and the eventual murder of his wife, Dracula deems the all humans monstrous and needs a hidden fortress to keep his daughter, as well as other monsters, out of the reach of humans. He explains to the primary human in the film, Johnny, that, “It’s a place I [Dracula] built for all those monsters lurking in the shadows, hiding from the persecution of human kind.”

Throughout the film, Dracula goes to great lengths to protect Mavis from the dangers of the human world. The film begins with Dracula reading his young daughter a book entitled *Tales of Humans*. This book is a horror book that details the monstrous acts of humans, which ends up scaring the young vampire until she runs and hides. The film alludes to Mavis’ early desire to leave the hotel and live a life of adventure in the human world. On her 118<sup>th</sup> birthday, Dracula finally gives Mavis permission to leave home and travel to a local village to get her first experience of the human world. Unbeknownst to Mavis, Dracula has created this village to mimic a mob. Instead of containing actual villagers, Dracula’s hired help dresses up as humans, wielding pitchforks and torches, and eventually scare Mavis into believing Dracula’s outdated view of the human world. While the viewing audience does not fear humans because they, themselves, are human, the characters in the film are invested in humans as monstrous. In order to maintain some level of scare while maintaining its comedy status, *Hotel Transylvania* must make humans into the metaphorical “boogey man,” so that they do not have to assume monstrous qualities Hollywood has ascribed for over 80 years.

While Dracula proclaims the horror of humans at the beginning of the film, his attitude shifts upon the introduction of Johnny, referred to in the film as Johnnystein, a distant cousin of Frankenstein. Dracula fears Johnny and his weird contraptions such as an mp3 player and a backpack; however, in an effort to prevent his guests from being startled, Dracula disguises Johnny as a monster and walks him around the hotel. Even though Dracula tries to force Johnny to leave and never return, Mavis' instant attraction to the human makes Johnny not so easily dismissed. The longer Johnny stays in the hotel, the more Dracula realizes that there is nothing to fear about the human. In fact, Johnny is creative, talented, and is on track to make Mavis' birthday bash an event to remember. Because Dracula does not want Mavis to "zing" (love at first sight) with Johnny, he insists that Johnny not date or kiss Mavis. During the party, Mavis finds out and Johnny rejects her in an effort to please Dracula. This type of transformation blurs the line between monster and human once again. Johnny successfully becomes Johnnystein by wearing a costume and makeup, and no monster in the hotel suspects he is human. While he physically looks mildly different, he does not act different from his human self. Johnny's presence in the film suggests that there is not a huge separation between monster and human, no matter the preconceived ideas of the audience or of Dracula.

While Dracula is pleased with Johnny's departure, Johnny's lesson of human change does not escape Dracula. While in the hotel, Johnny tells Dracula that, "This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century. People aren't the same as they were back then [when Dracula's wife died]." Dracula departs on an adventure into the human world with his host of Universal sidekicks to bring Johnny back. While Johnny's presence in the human world indicates that there might not be a difference between human and monster, the monsters quickly discover in the human world that humans and monsters are more similar than different. The monsters stumble upon the Monster Festival in

which every human is dressed as an iconic monster. The monsters soon realize that humans no longer hate monsters, but rather humans idolize and want to emulate monsters. By the end of the film, the message is clear; humans and monsters are both harmless and can, indeed, live in peaceful harmony. This message mirrors many other contemporary children's films by including monstrous figures and labeling them good because they emulate human behavior instead of monstrous actions. For example, in *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) dragons can finally be accepted into the mainstream community because they are not fire-breathing monsters, but rather creatures who act humanlike and happen to breathe fire. *Hotel Transylvania* is able to bridge the gap between human and monsters by having non-monstrous humans, as well as non-monstrous monsters. The film even presents Johnny, Mavis, and their inevitable "zing" kiss as a model for how humans and monsters can co-exist. The elimination of all threats is what creates a "happily ever after" for this film. The film must first debunk the idea that monsters are a threat to humans, while simultaneously presenting humans as alternative monsters. In order to resolve the conflict and keep comedic status, the film removes all threats and ends with the necessary heterosexual coupling required of most children's films.

While this film does not look like a mainstream horror movie, it engages with the conventions of mainstream horror to present horror conventions to a new target audience. While horror scholars' definitions would suggest that this film is a comedy because the monsters are non-threatening, children's animated horror films do not follow all the exact conventions of mainstream horror. In this subgenre, this film could be considered horror because of the dialogue it enters into with mainstream horror, especially classic horror. Though the monsters are non-threatening, they play a central role in teaching children about horror conventions and tropes. This film serves as a bridge between accepted children's genres like comedy and characteristics



of horror. It does a disservice to the film and the subgenre to only label the film as comedy because it does enter into a dialogue with mainstream horror, as well as other children's animated horror films.

## **IGOR (2008)**

*Hotel Transylvania* draws on an entire cast of recycled monsters in order to create comedy; however, *Igor* focuses on one specific famous evil sidekick and fills the rest of the film with generic horror conventions that are familiar to adult audiences, and ones which younger audiences must learn in order to engage with the genre as they grow older. Central to *Igor*'s plot is the concept of "an" Igor, not a specific Igor, though the film eventually focuses on one. Igor is a label for those characters who have the physical deformity of a hunchback. In the fictional world of Malaria, all Igors are assistants to mad scientists. Igors are stereotypically unintelligent, physically deformed, and have a characteristic speech impediment. All of these traits make Igors perfect assistants and subordinates to mad scientists, who are responsible for creating evil inventions as Malaria's main source of financial stability. *Igor* immediately makes the main character, Igor, non-threatening and presents another monster, Eva, who while at moments performs horrific deeds, is by no means a monster. The film reverses many dichotomies such as smart scientist-stupid assistant, but most notably the film presents the true horror of the story to be the unjust treatment of Igors in a society that privileges the able-bodied and exploits disability for financial gain.

The film begins with a typical horror scene of gothic architecture and a thunderstorm. The voice of a disembodied narrator informs the audience that Malaria is a town that is full of evil scientists who create evil inventions and are assisted by Igors. Quickly, a seemingly unique Igor enters the scene. He is different from other Igors, at least by displays of inventiveness,

intelligence, and dreams of upward mobility. The evil scientist he assists, Dr. Glickenstein, is a dull minded and incompetent scientist. While Igor steps out of his subservient role to help Dr. Glickenstein, the great scientist ignores Igor and accidentally kills himself by electrocution. Igor uses this opportunity to become the scientist he has always dreamt of becoming. He uses his previous inventions, Brain and Scampers, to assemble a patchwork monster, much like Frankenstein's creature. Once the monster, Eva, comes to life, they realize that the "evil bone" must not have activated and take Eva to a drive-thru "brainwash," which uses media to train the brain. Accidentally, Scamper changes the channel from evil monster to acting lessons; therefore, Eva is not a monster, but rather an aspiring thespian. All the while, Dr. Glickenstein's competition, Dr. Schadenfreud, discovers the evil monster and wants to possess the monster and enter it into the evil science fair so he can rule Malaria. After several comedic chase scenes, Dr. Schadenfreud reports Igor to the king for working on science. Igor is sent directly to the Igor recycling plant, and Dr. Schadenfreud takes possession of Eva, activates her evil bone, and unleashes her at the evil science fair where she destroys all the other evil inventions in a destructive musical number from *Annie*. With the help of Brain and Scamper, Igor escapes his bleak fate, goes to the science fair and reminds Eva that she can be whomever she wants to be. The film ends with the overturning of the monarchical power, as well as the superior position of evil scientists.

While even the most avid horror enthusiasts expressed mixed reviews about the film, *Igor* is undoubtedly comprised of horror parts, even if they are patched together in ways that resemble Frankenstein's creature. By using conventional settings and sounds, *Igor* firmly enters into a dialogue with mainstream horror. The setting of the film, Malaria, looks like many of the early Universal film sets with dark colors, abundance of storms, and eerie looking buildings. The first

line of the film works to establish the association with horror. Igor states, “Here in the Kingdom of Malaria, every day's forecast is rainy, with a 100% chance of horror!” While said in a light-hearted manner, this statement juxtaposed with the visual aesthetics of the film mirror classic horror. One of the deleted scenes of film shows an even darker opening, which directors decided worked against the overall comedic feeling of the film. Instead of opening with gothic aesthetics and a kind voice giving background on Malaria, the alternate opening was a public service announcement giving the history of Malaria and its current industry of producing evil inventions and holding the world at ransom. The PSA opening is much darker in tone, but it does not align as firmly with classic horror. By deciding to go with an opening with a lighter tone, but more horror conventions, the film roots itself in the Universal tradition of horror, which allows it to enter into dialogue with mainstream horror, despite its comedic moments.

The visual aesthetics of the film align traditional gothic horror, and the film opens with the soundscape of horror. According to Neil Lerner, “Music in horror film, just as in any other cinematic genre, participates crucially in the creation of the film’s meaning, and so close attention to the score with both the eye and the ear will generate readings of the film that do not emerge when considering only the visual and cinematographic elements” (x). *Igor* uses traditional horror soundscapes at the beginning of the film in order to be classified as horror.

Janet Halfyard surveys some of the musical practices in present in mainstream horror films:

Horror, for example, has particular musical gestures—the stinger to scare us, drones and sustained tremolandi strings to create suspense—that composers have long used to create the kinds of emotional responses required by the genre. Orchestral scores predominate, and with them come uses of some otherwise unusual instruments: harpsichords and church organs probably appear more in horror films than in any other genre, and the cultural association of the sound of these instruments with gothic horror has been discussed. Other strategies for classic horror scoring focus on the use of atonal and dissonant harmonies” (21).

At the beginning of *Igor*, the film heavily relies on big band, orchestral scores and ominous organ tracks to immerse the viewers in a horror experience. While the film does not heavily depend on the element of suspense provided by the tremolandi strings, the use of theramin during the introduction of the film and the creation of the monster is all too reminiscent of *Frankenstein*; however, as the film continues, the soundscape changes to include more contemporary songs that bring *Igor* into a comedic horror film.

Organs and dissonance abounds in the first section of the film, but the film's soundtrack becomes more complex, specifically by deviating from horror music and using popular "oldies" to supplement the film's scenes. This shift is not only aural but also plot driven. The film changes from solely muted hues to include bright yellows and oranges. The plot includes love, friendship, and acting; instead of focusing on evil inventions, the music starts to mark the characters' embrace of the film's didactic and trite message of "You can be anyone you want to be, regardless of what others and society say." The use of predominantly non-horror music commences in the resurrection of the monster. Instead of sounds of storms and shrieks of "It's Alive," the film uses Louis Prima's "Jump Jivin an' Wail." Furthermore, when Eva goes to the brainwash, popular 1950s classic "The Twist" plays, establishing nostalgia more than horror. Eva's only monstrous moment occurs without the startle effect, organs, harpsichords, or big band orchestras; she performs her dance of destruction to "Tomorrow," the famous track from the musical *Annie*. While this scene is potentially the most interesting part of the film, its participation both within the genres of horror and musical theater creates a hybrid space that does not look or sound like other conventional horror narratives. Finally, the film ends with Johnny Nash's, "I Can See Clearly Now," ironically underscored by a group of blind orphans performing a dance to the song. Like many children's animated films, the film ends with a note of "happily

ever after,” not an open-ended monstrous threat to present a sequel film. The final song perfectly places the film outside of traditional open-ended horror films, reassuring the audience that any horrific threat that potentially was present in the film no longer exists. Since this film truly exhibits more traits of comedy than horror, the early use of horror sound and visual aesthetics is crucial in the dialogue between this children’s animated film and its mainstream predecessors.

While the music works to simultaneously establish a conversation with mainstream horror and comedic children films, the depiction of monsters in the film also help to connect the film with horror while presenting comedic material. There are two main aesthetic violations that constitute a monster according to Carroll’s definition: Eva and Igor. Eva is a reimagined Frankenstein’s creature, pieced together by various body parts. Her gendering as female almost immediately removes the threat of monstrosity, which will be discussed further in chapter three. While Igor does not look monstrous, but rather physically deformed in a sanitized way, he falls into the monster category due to the archetypal Igor role in the *Frankenstein* narrative. In order to focus on the humor over the horror, the film removes the threat posed by the monsters by forcing them internalize the message they have a choice to be monstrous or not.

Igor is designed to reflect the grotesqueness of classic Universal cinema. The film frequently focuses on his hallmark hunchback. In fleeting moments, we hear his notable speech impediment and total subservient attitude. Igor does not actually have any speech problems, but rather performs his social role, which includes the lisp. He does not believe he is inferior to the evil scientists, but again, must perform the part of an Igor. Igor is not a monster, but rather viewed as monstrous because of his physical deformities. The film works to remove the threat posed by Igor’s aesthetic violation by means of animation style and casting. The character of Igor (sometimes spelled Ygor), has a rich cinematic history. While many remember Igor as the

hunchback assistant in *Frankenstein* (1931), that version had an assistant named Fritz. Bela Lugosi played this iconic character in *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) and *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942); however, Lugosi's Ygor was neither hunchback nor a lab assistant. He did have a twisted back and neck due to his occupation as a blacksmith. While there are several iconic Igor's, none are as cute or stylized as Tony Leondis' character. Boston Globe film critic Janice Page states that, "its [*Igor's*] characters, artfully drawn as they are, seem like an odd combination of Tim Burton castoffs, Venetian party masks, Wii-friendly game pieces . . ." By creating a character who physically resembles the combination of the stereotypical Igor and Nickelodeon's *Hey Arnold*, the film sanitizes the physical deformities and removes a majority of the aesthetic violation associated with the cinematic depiction of Igor. Additionally, removing the iconic speech impediment continues to revise the image of Igor from one of physical and aural grotesqueness to one of normalcy. In the 2008 animated film, John Cusack, who has played the iconic underdog in many Hollywood roles, voices Igor. Instead of having a thick, foreign-like accent, Igor is voiced by an All-American voice with no distinct characterization.

The film successfully removes the threat of monstrosity from Igor; however, the true horror of unequal treatment due to physical disability is never resolved or even addressed in the film. Igor seems to be an exception to the Igor rule. He is characterized in order to be non-threatening, and he eventually rises to that status of President Igor, the ultimate ruler of Malaria; however, such progress is not demonstrated for all Igers. While they are no longer subservient to mad scientists, the only Igers we see at the end of the film is the main Igor, with all the power, and a female Igor who is serving refreshments at the final performance. While the film focuses on enforcing the message of non-conformity to social expectations, it fails to truly eradicate the social limits that subjugated Igers based on physical deformities. Clearly, this film enters into a

dialogue with mainstream horror through its use of horror aesthetics and sounds; however, it fails to address to true horror in the film by sanitizing one Igor and having him metonymically stand-in for the disenfranchised whole. The film sacrifices addressing true social horrors in order to achieve a comedic effect that flirts with the horror genre.

It is easy to dismiss this film from the cannon of children's animated horror film because of its low critical and financial success; however, *Igor* demonstrates how recycled monsters can be threatening, while simultaneously non-threatening. The main Igor constantly worked against societal expectations, and eventually achieved success. Though the happily-ever-after is disguised in a gold cloak and a smile, Igor is an aesthetic violation that has transformative potential. The new title and clothes make Igor appear different, but only by a minuscule amount. The fact that he is now a ruler and appears like a monster reflects the positive transformative power to both Wood and Hutchings allude. The site of transformation does not occur by removing the threat of the monster, but allowing the monster to continue to have physical deformities and social power, which is atypical to both the subgenre of children's animated horror films, as well as mainstream horror.

## **DOMESTIC MONSTERS**

Children's animated horror films capitalize on horror that will have the greatest effect on children. Since, according the Joann Cantor and Mary Beth Oliver, children are frightened by the supernatural, the dark, animals, and monsters, children's animated horror film changes spots of safety into the horrific by introducing these elements. Cantor and Oliver argue, "young children are more likely than older children and adolescents to fear things that are not real, in the sense that their occurrence in the real world is impossible" (233). This statement reflects how Carroll describes all monsters: "the most effective way of characterizing such monsters is to say that

they are beings whose existence science denies” (148). Thus, children’s animated horror film takes the familiar and inserts supernatural elements in order to create the monstrous domestic. In fact, horror in this subgenre often “warns of the dangers mysteriously close to even the most familiar places. It reminds us that the world is not safe” (Jackson, Coats, and McGillis 12). Children’s animated horror films transform the safety and comfort of domestic spaces and roles by inserting supernatural elements into them, thus making them monstrous and something that cannot exist in reality. These monsters can be especially fear inducing because of locating the monstrous not only near home, but also in the home and as the home. *Monster House* (2006) transforms the traditional haunted house narrative into a monstrous house, while *Coraline* (2009) reimagines spaces and people of comfort as the greatest source of danger and fear. Both of these films demonstrate how domestic monsters, rather than traditional Universal monster types, hold the potential to truly frighten children, not make them laugh.

### **MONSTER HOUSE (2006)**

*USA Today* film critic, Scott Bowles asserts, “*Monster House* may be the first true horror film for children.” While some critics claim the intended audience is ambivalent, most reviews touted the film as one that is scary for the whole family. In fact, some called into question the PG rating because of the perceived number of terrified children. *Monster House* transforms the traditional haunted house narrative into a monstrous house. Instead of including the gothic house as a setting for horror, this film literally transforms the gothic house into the monstrous, thus using the literal emblem of domesticity as the monster. No Universal monsters or allusions to Universal monsters appear in this film, which creates an atmosphere that aligns itself more with horror than humor; however, that does not exclude the presence of humor within *Monster House*. Instead of relying heavily on pastiche and allusions for a laugh, the film draws more on slapstick



comedy and puberty jokes to relieve the tension built up by the threat of the monstrous domestic. Exploring the monster in the film in terms of its participation in the domestic, both as a space of domesticity as well as a disembodied domestic role, a wife, demonstrates children's animated horror films' use of the domestic as a mode to create genuine horror for its intended audience, even if that horror looks drastically different than mainstream horror. Furthermore, analyzing the use of comedy in the film establishes the film as horror that uses elementary forms of comedy as a way to relieve tension, not to create a comedic film. Both horror and humor in this film proves that children's animated horror films can have comedy and retain their status as horror films.

The domestic role of the house is central in this narrative; there are two competing spaces of the domestic, one that represents safety and one that poses a threat for the protagonists. These two spaces function as foils for each other, each highlighting the perceived safety or threat in the other space. The film opens with DJ safely in his own home under the supervision of his parents. This space is the domestic space of security and one with which most children are familiar. The function of this space parallels a stereotypical childhood experience of protection from outside elements, as well as protection by parents from unknown dangers; however, DJ's parents do not remain in the house for long due to a trip to an out-of-town dental convention. After DJ's parents leave, DJ, too, exits the space that is still safe in order to distance himself from his apathetic babysitter and to play with his friend Chowder outside of the home. At first, the physical area outside of the two domestic spaces is liminal, neither providing safety or threat. Chowder is the first to exit the liminal space of DJ's driveway and enter the crotchety old neighbor's, Mr. Nebbercracker, yard. At first, the old man appears to be the villain of this film; he has no tolerance for children and refuses to allow them to retrieve their possessions from his private property. After the old man appears dead, though he suffers from a heart attack and recovers, DJ

and Chowder believe the threat is removed. They are not scared of the space of Mr. Nebbercracker's property, but rather of the man himself. After a quick celebration, DJ comes to realize that the true terror is being unleashed, not by a human, but rather a structure. The house becomes more animated. A fire is started in the hearth of the home, and DJ receives a call that comes from Nebbercracker's unoccupied residence. While he cannot identify the source of terror, he begins fearing the space of Mr. Nebbercracker's property, not the man himself. *The New York Times* film critic, A. O. Scott, argues, "One of the spooky archetypes of childhood imagination — the dark, mysterious house across the street — is literally brought to life in *Monster House* . . ." Joining with his pals Chowder and Jenny, the trio explores the danger on the property, only to realize that the danger is not on the property, but rather *is* the property. DJ and his friends quickly realize that the monster is the house itself; it devours not only children's toys, but also any child or adult "foolish" enough to enter the property.

While the group is trying to assess the danger present in Nebbercracker's house in order to escape it, they retreat to DJ's house for research. Even with the absence of his parents, the house itself offers safety from the threats lurking across the street. In the same way that Nebbercracker is not synonymous with the threat posed by his house, DJ's parents are not equated with the security inherent in their house. The adults of the film do not pose danger or safety; the physical domestic spaces represented by the houses create the threat and the space to ultimately seek refuge and overcome it. DJ's house as space of domestic security has equipment to spy on the threatening house, and ultimately provides tools for the children in order to penetrate the monster's four walls.

In many ways, the monster house embodies the quintessential gothic house. According to Rose Lovell-Smith, the gothic house is, "one that is difficult to get into by definition . . . It is

also often difficult to get out of, containing within itself, or forming for its inhabitants, a prison” (101). The children have difficulty both entering and escaping the monster house. The difficulty posed by the house does not lie in creepy, winding corridors, secret passages, or hidden rooms. The children only need to enter the property in order to enter the house; however, this path of entrance leads to the disappearance of toys, children, and even police officers. After tricking the house into entrance via a disguised vacuum cleaner, the children enter and explore the house. They examine the main level of the house as well as the basement. There, DJ discovers that Nebbercracker’s wife, Constance, is what animates the house and is causing the destruction. With this information, the children attempt to exit the house; however, this task is not simple and is seemingly impossible. After realizing the house is Constance, the children ascribe human anatomy to the house and realize that they can activate the house’s gag reflex with spraying the uvula, a chandelier, with water guns. The house quickly vomits the children into the front yard. *Monster House* uses the conventions of a gothic horror house, especially the elements of entrance and exit, to create elements of horror in the monster. The domestic gothic space creates fear in not only the protagonists, but also the intended audience, as well.

As previously stated, the trio of children discovers that the monster house is possessed by Constance, the wife of Mr. Nebbercracker. Even the root of the monstrosity in the house is caused by a domestic figure: a wife. From the short exposition the film supplies, Constance is an abject figure, marked different by her enormous size. She performs in a circus as a sideshow and resides in a cage, almost like an animal, during her free time. Because of the taunting and teasing, Constance has an anger issue, especially when teased for her size. Mr. Nebbercracker falls in love with this abject figure, marries her, and decides to build a house with her. During the construction of the house, Constance becomes angry with some children passing by. In her

anger, she tries to chase the kids, but ultimately falls into the cement of the foundation of the house. Instead of simply dying, Constance becomes a disembodied spirit who assumes the form of the house. In this way, the monster house is doubly domestic as it is inhabited by a woman in a domestic role, as well as a place of domestic habitation, especially common in heteronormative narratives.

In order to permanently remove the threat posed by the domestic in the narrative, the children must destroy the double domesticity by demolishing the house and freeing the spirit of Constance. Once the house uproots and becomes mobile, Mr. Nebbercracker knows that demolition is the only way to save the town from this domestic monstrosity. He prepares DJ on how to use the dynamite, as well as where he will need to throw the explosives. Lovell-Smith argues that the gothic house is a space that family problems must be resolved. Once Mr. Nebbercracker and Constance resolve issues of insecurity and acceptance within their marriage, DJ is able to destroy the house and it no longer poses a threat to the children or the community at large. Upon the physical destruction of the house, Constance's spirit rises from the house and is free from confinement, at last. There is no threat remaining by the film's end. Mr. Nebbercracker returns to his home's foundation and returns all the toys to the neighborhood kids. Even the humans are released from the foundation in order to return to a normal life. The film ends with one domestic space, that of safety. DJ's parents' return and the neighborhood have no site of danger once the threat of the domestic monstrous is removed. *Monster House* embraces the conventions of the gothic, especially that of the gothic house, and uses them to create a monster that is familiar, but infused with supernatural spirits and actions that create a threat the unsettles its intended audience.

Some critics accuse children's animated horror films of being too funny to be considered scary. While filmmakers have pushed the envelope in the past twenty-years to include more fear-provoking elements, many adults believe that children are not developmentally equipped to handle the characteristics of the horror genre and thus the genre employs comedy. One way this emerging subgenre is handling this cultural fear is by presenting a horror narrative with comedic elements interspersed for relief of tension and anxiety. Julie Cross contends that "the use of humour can introduce and make palatable the elements of horror . . . [it] can serve to release excess emotion and/or nervous energy that is vented through laughter to beneficial effect" (59). *Monster House*'s use of comedy mirrors more mainstream horror, instead of comedy films. The film is not devoid of comedy, but rather uses this comedy to provide a release of tension to its audience. In an effort to keep from shifting into humor, the film relies on slapstick comedy and puberty jokes to provide a perceived need for release in its audience, unlike the role reversal of Universal monsters as seen in *Hotel Transylvania* and *Igor*. While there are two main comedy types in the film, neither set of comedy reclassifies *Monster House* as a comedic horror film, but rather reaffirms its status as a horror film that reflects the conventions of mainstream horror.

### **CORALINE (2009)**

The house is certainly a symbol of domesticity, but at least as equally metonymical is the heterosexual family structure of mother, father, and at least one child. While *Monster House* focuses on the monstrous domestic *as* the home, Henry Selick's *Coraline* places the domestic monster *within* the home, in the form of Other Mother. In order to create a true sense of horror, this film relies on the bifurcation of space. Unlike *Monster House*, the dual space is located within a single house in the form of Coraline's gothic apartment and a non-gothic, but identical, apartment in the other world. Coraline seems dissatisfied in the real world; however, there is no

sense of danger. Even though her apartment looks like a setting from a horror film, Coraline does not experience any threats from peers, parents, neighbors, or supernatural presences. Overall, she is a normal child who is bored with the mundane tasks and requirements of the everyday world. When she enters the other world, she ascribes this sense of safety onto the domestic space of the other apartment. Since people, places, and things appear almost identical, the sense of safety in the real world transfers over to the other world. *Coraline*'s horror is rooted in the reappropriation of the domestic as a source of the supernatural. This film takes people and spaces of domestic security and infuses them with danger, which allows the audience to question their own safety within their perceived safe domestic spaces. By examining the relationship between the real world and the other world, it is evident that the safe turns uncanny and eventually into horror.

*Coraline* begins with no sense of fear, but rather complete disappointment in her everyday life. Coraline is a modern day Alice. Because of her parents' focus on their own careers, her eccentric older neighbors, and the lack of neighborhood companions, Coraline goes on an adventure and finds her own metaphorical rabbit hole. The small door located in an isolated section of the living parlor leads to the other world. Instead of Wonderland, the other world assumes a physical identity almost indistinguishable from her own house. The architectural layout is the same, and she has the same neighbors as in the real world. The only differences between the two spaces seem to be improvements, not alterations that would cause any alarm. For example, the lighting in the new house is fresh and bright. The painting and the wallpaper appear recently renovated. Additionally, Coraline's room looks full of toys, color, a more comfortable bed, and more updated bedding and wall decorations. From an aesthetic view, her real world apartment appears gothic and lurking of danger, and the other world offers a positive alternative for an escape. In the vein of Tim Burton horror, the other world looks far

more appealing than the real world; however, unlike Burton, the aesthetics mask the danger inherent in the other world. The visuals of the other world work to construct a safer space for Coraline, which allows an even greater sense of horror when that space is exposed as dangerous.

In the film, the spaces are not only duplicates, but the main cast of characters, especially the domestic roles of mother and father are also doubled. Much like the physical differences, Other Mother and Other Father seem to be an improvement over Coraline's biological parents. Coraline's parents are financially unstable, living between catalog publication assignments. They do not engage with Coraline, other than to tell her to leave them alone. Coraline's only meal in the real world is composed of decaying ingredients and resembles slop, more than an actual meal. While Coraline is afforded the necessities of a shelter, food and school uniform, there is no room for luxuries in the parents' time or budget. Her other parents are physically identical to her real-world parents, with the exception of the button eyes. Many physical attributes of the other parents seem like an improvement over the real parents. For example, Other Mother usually smiles and expresses physical affection toward Coraline. Her clothes seem more fashionable, and she wears brighter shades of make-up, which accentuates her smile and makes her look more alive. Other Father has better posture, and instead of dragging his feet between rooms, he has a lively step. His clothes look freshly pressed, which helps his character seem far less burdened than Coraline's biological father does. While all these aesthetic differences seem to favor the other parents over the real parents, the button eyes automatically create an uncanny feeling. In the 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud concludes that the uncanny is, "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1-2). Freud's definition hinges on the German words "heimlich", meaning familiar or known, and its antonym "unheimlich," meaning unknown. The uncanny requires the feeling of the unfamiliar, familiar.

The other parents create an uncanny feeling in the audience because on the one hand they are “heimlich.” They are physical embodiments of the real parents; however, their eyes make them simultaneously “unheimlich” because human parents do not possess buttons as eyes. The button eyes are the first indicator that the other world, despite its improvements upon the real world, holds the potential for danger.

Coraline engages with the other world as an escape from her mundane life. At first, it seems like she is perfectly happy. Her neighbors are infinitely more entertaining, and her annoying friend, Wybie, cannot speak at all. While the parent’s button eyes are the first indicator of danger in the real world, Coraline does not recognize the threat posed by the other world until her other parents request that she trade in her eyes for buttons. Upon saying no, Coraline enters her other world bedroom and expects to wake up in the real world, like all the adventures before; however, when she awakes in the other world, she realizes that the domestic space she has deemed safe is no longer as it seems. Coraline is no longer free to move between the two worlds, but is rather trapped by Other Mother and the physical space of the domestic. The truly frightening aspect occurs when Coraline realizes that everything she thought was safe, because of domestic duplication, is not as it seems. The danger enters the film when the domestic space of the other world is perceived as a confining threat.

In her attempts to escape, Coraline realizes that not only does the physical space pose a threat, but so does the domestic figure of Other Mother. When Coraline utters the simple phrase “You are not my real mother,” Other Mother turns from the emblem of perfectly performed domesticity into the monstrous figure of a spider. Coraline quickly realizes that all the domestic duplications that provided her the feeling of safety were actually creations of Other Mother to lure her into the Other World and ultimately trap her there for eternity. Her neighbors are



creations of Other Mother in order to entertain her, convince her, and ultimately distract her focus from the limitations imposed on the other world. Even her Other Father is a construction of Other Mother in order to reproduce the domestic heterosexual structure of the family. While he does show genuine care for Coraline, he is ultimately controlled and destroyed by Other Mother. The entire domestic space and complex set of relationships are infused with supernatural elements, which creates the space of fiction that creates horror in *Coraline* and can truly terrify children in the viewing audience.

The comedy in *Coraline* is subtle, but not non-existent. Instead of slapstick comedy and puberty jokes, *Coraline* is full of scenes that try to pacify the sense of horror, especially when first entering the other world. Because the real world is depicted as a gothic atmosphere, the fun colors and never-ending entertainment distracts the audience from the bleak reality in the real world. Once the domestic monstrous is realized, there are no instances of any comedy, but rather the relief of the moment comes from Coraline's escape back to the real world. Once Other Mother reveals her monstrous intentions, Coraline does manage to sneak past Other Mother's insect minions and return to her normal world. This escape provides a moment of tension relief for Coraline and the viewing audience. This moment is short-lived when Coraline realizes that Other Mother has kidnapped her real parents, and she must return to the other world in order to save her family. The re-entrance to the other world creates a more menacing atmosphere because the people and places that were once there no longer represent the familiar, but rather sites of terror. The welcoming, entertaining neighbors are working at the hands of Other Mother, and even the landscape attempts to eliminate Coraline. Again, the tension created by her quest to save her parents, the ghost children, and herself is relieved only when Coraline is successful and returns to her normal parents, neighbors, and world. In a scene that is reflective of Brian De

Palma's *Carrie* (1976), the Other Mother's hand does make one more startling entrance into the real world before *Coraline*, with the help of Wybie, eliminates the threat for good. Again, even after this "shock effect," a return to normalcy is what relieves the tension of terror, not comedy.

*Wall Street Journal* film critic Joe Morgenstern describes *Coraline* as, "a children's entertainment that's much too scary for little kids," and he is not alone in his assessment of the fright level for target audience. Over thirty different film reviews published in popular news presses note that *Coraline* is frightening, with some mentioning that the film could cause nightmares. What is so terrifying about this film is the re-appropriation of the domestic as monstrous. By transforming real domestic spaces of comfort into places of fear, *Coraline* removes the safety associated with domestic duplication and inserts the supernatural elements like a belle dame figure. While many children's animated film reviews detail how non-scary or even comedic this subgenre is, the lack of comedy and the use of domestic monsters is the key reason *Coraline* achieves such a high level of horror compared to other children's animated horror films and allows a clear critical space for children's animated horror films to intersect with mainstream horror.

## **HORROR AND COMEDY COLLIDE**

The four films discussed in this chapter point to the critical bifurcation in children's animated horror genre. Either films use recycled tropes to create humor, rather than horror, in their viewing audience, or they create unique, often times domestic, monsters to create horror while leaving comedy out entirely or using it as a tension reliever. Tim Burton seems to be an exception to this rule with films such as *Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *Corpse Bride* (2005), *Frankenweenie* (2012). Danny Elfman's film scores often lend an air of comedy to the films by creating narratives that contain elements of horror, but resemble the musical comedy

genre with upbeat numbers composed in major keys. With the exception of Burton, the balance between horror and comedy seem skewed, overall, in this highly criticized subgenre; however, Laika studios' *ParaNorman* (2012) combats this division by presenting a convincing, threatening monster, a horde of zombies, and a variety of jokes that stem from the stereotypes established in *The Breakfast Club* (1985). While *Hotel Transylvania* and *Igor* are clearly comedy and *Monster House* and *Coraline* strongly reflect mainstream horror, *ParaNorman* bridges the horror/humor divide, synthesizing the two different agendas into a cohesive whole.

### **PARANORMAN (2012)**

*ParaNorman* resembles the B-rated horror films of the 1980s. The film opens with this type of film playing on the television, and we quickly realize that we are watching the visual aesthetics of the same film on our own screens. Typical of most mainstream horror films of the 80s and 90s, the cast of *ParaNorman* is comprised mainly of a protagonist, a group of friends, and a monster. This film even includes the crazy drunk-looking guy that forewarns of danger. The reason *ParaNorman* effectively synthesizes horror and humor is the clear, allotted roles for character types. Most of the humor in the film comes from the secondary characters who are Neil, Norman's only friend, Courtney, Norman's sister, Mitch, Neil's brother, and Alvin, the school bully. Norman and Agatha, the town witch, do not engage in the comedy of the film, but rather work to produce and eventually eliminate the elements of horror.

These delineated roles lead to critical reviews that praise the film's fun attitude as well as the dark moments. In fact, most reviews address the film's comedy and use of macabre. *Washington Post* reviewer, Sean O'Connell states that *ParaNorman* is, "a colorfully macabre stop-motion animation comedy that embraces the sociopolitical allegories of George A. Romero's zombie pictures and reworks them into a feature-length episode of *Scooby-Doo*."

Furthermore, Keith Uhlich from *Time Out New York* declares, “sensitive parents shouldn't fret; this [*ParaNorman*] is the kind of grim fairy tale, equal parts midnight-movie macabre and family-round-the-hearth compassionate, that scares in all the right ways.” While these reviews demonstrate the positive responses to the film, critic Tasha Robinson argues that *ParaNorman* “plays with comedy and drama, but keeps failing to commit to one or the other.” Robinson’s statement is a critique of the film; however, I posit that it is this failure to commit that allows *ParaNorman* to successfully integrate comedy and horror and avoid the negative labels of only comedy or of being too scary for the intended audience. By analyzing the two character types, *ParaNorman* stands as a children’s animated horror film that addresses the main critiques of the subgenre and helps legitimize this subgenre as part of the larger horror genre, not just children’s entertainment.

The secondary characters of friends and family bring horror in much the same way as the *Monster House* trio. The film uses Norman’s best friend, Neil, as a comedic character, not by so much what he says, but by the clear jokes about weight. When considering Neil as a character, the first notable characteristic is that he is “chubby,” which the film works as a comedic thread throughout the film. The film takes a staunch stance on bullying concerning Norman. In fact, the film’s main message is that it is okay, even excellent, to be different. However, the film bullies Neil in the sense that he is picked on throughout the film for his weight. At times, the school bullies reduce Neil to his weight. Alvin slams Neil against the school lockers and teases him about his “boobs.” Neil responds, “They’re not boobs,” but upon being hit in the chest he exclaims, “Ouch, my boobs!” Alvin’s action is clearly bullying Neil about his weight, but Neil’s response is a comedic comeback that elicits laughter from a wide range of audience members. Additionally, the film includes details about Neil’s weight that seems to exploit Neil for comedic

purposes. Before Norman heads downtown to pacify the town witch, Neil is upstairs in his room watching a 1980s exercise video. Instead of participating in the cardio, Neil is staring at a jazzercise looking woman while consuming copious amounts of food and soda. The comedy does not derive from Neil's comeback to being bullied, but rather the film teases Neil about his weight, almost becoming a bully itself.

The characters of Courtney, Mitch, and Alvin all seem to echo the cinematic stereotypes depicted in *The Breakfast Club*: the cheerleader, the jock, and the bully. In many ways, the two film's dialogue with each other to create humor almost solely based on the fulfillment of ridiculed stereotypes. Courtney, while she is popular and a cheerleader, is not attractive. Her attempt to retain her popularity, despite her family's interference, provides comedy, especially when she is talking to her friends on her cell phone or trying to flirt with Mitch, who seems oblivious to her advances. Mitch's character is the stereotypical dumb jock, who is physically built, good with his hands, but has never picked up a book. His stupidity starkly contrasts both Norman and Neil. His lack of common sense is evident when he encounters the zombies for the first time. He does not know what the creature is, and is shocked when the head becomes animated outside of its attachment to the body. His reaction is to turn, run back to the vehicle, and scream in an effeminate tone. Mitch's last bit of humor comes from the disparity between his physical appearance and coherence to the stereotypical jock and his declaration of his homosexuality. Though this information seems tacked on at the end, it leaves audiences laughing both of Mitch's deviation from the stereotype, as well as Courtney's numerous failed attempts during the film. Alvin provides the film with an air of comedy when he becomes scared and must be pacified by the other secondary characters. While huddling in the library trying to find out how to rid the town of the witch, it is Alvin who becomes the most scared and hides from the

crowd wielding pitchforks and torches. This type of comedy is most exemplified in the colloquial phrase of “he could dish it, but he couldn’t take it.” All four characters work against the backdrop of witches, zombies, and a town mob and provide the comedic moments in the film.

With the action of the four secondary characters, it would appear that the film would be labeled and reviewed as a comedy; however, in addition to the aesthetics of horror, Norman and Agatha encounter the truly horrific, which creates a balance between horror and humor in the film that is potentially the most balanced in the subgenre to date. Norman is not a comedic character; mainly, he is a tragically misunderstood little boy with unexplainable abilities to communicate with the dead. He does not relate to his family and classmates, with the exception of Neil. The only comedic scene in the film with Norman at the center is when his uncle’s ghost appears to him through the toilet in the boy’s bathroom at school. Considering only the aural traits of this scene, it would seem that Norman is having an incredibly painful bowel movement; however, the source of the comedy in the film is not Norman (or his bowels), but rather his uncle and his venue of appearing to Norman.

Norman is tasked with pacifying the town witch so that the town can go another year in peace. As he ventures to the old part of the creepy, dark cemetery time runs out and he encounters a horde of colonial zombies. Norman spends the middle section of the film trying to escape the frightening undead and figure out a way to keep the witch’s curse from taking effect. He faces true danger when he encounters the witch in the town square, especially when she casts a spell that knocks Norman off balance. Unlike DJ and Coraline, Norman faces this threat in order to eliminate it. He does not retreat to his house or a normal world, but rather talks to the “monster” as an actual human being, capable of logic, feelings, and understanding. Because

Norman stays strictly a horror protagonist, with the threat of danger constantly present, the film balances horror and comedy better than most other films in this subgenre.

Agatha, the girl turned town witch, is a horror monster that in many ways is like Constance, embodied in *Monster House*. She is a female who is victimized due to something beyond her control. This paranormal characteristic ultimately leads to her death and her desire to haunt and terrorize the town. Every year, she must be read a fairy tale in order to put her back to sleep until the next Halloween. Agatha, while she is just a young girl, has some of the most terrifying animation the entire subgenre. In the confrontation scene with Norman, Agatha is surrounded by a neon electric field. Her eyes become even wider, her hair stands on edge, and her voice rivals the possessed Regan McNeil from *The Exorcist*. She burns the fairy tale book and tells Norman she is uncontrollable.

The resolution of the film comes when Norman confronts the horror with no comedy for tension relief. He creates a story for Agatha to listen to, which details the powers of a misunderstood girl, who was unjustly killed for a power that was natural. Making Agatha relive the story of her own unjust persecution, Norman posits that Agatha is the same monster as those who killed her hundreds of years before. When Agatha comprehends the parallels between her personal horrors and the horrors she inflicts on the town, the electric field recedes and Agatha, in her childlike form devoid of all elements of horror, is released from the compulsory haunting of the townspeople. In this moment, the town is free from the horror of Agatha and the town and the people in it return to normalcy, with the exception that Norman is now accepted and heralded as a hero. Agatha, Norman, and their confrontation are horrific and are only possible by having the secondary characters perform acts of comedy before the dramatic conclusion. The film balances horror and humor by dividing the tasks and allowing both to co-exist but through different

characters. This is why reviews are split between warning parents of *ParaNorman*'s horrifying scenes and chalking the film up to a modern day *Scooby Doo* film. By having comedy that does not interrupt the horror, *ParaNorman* creates a film that breaks down the internal barriers that exist in children's animated films between horror and humor, and allows the subgenre to come closer to mainstream horror.

## CONCLUSION

The biggest obstacle in assimilating children's animated horror film into mainstream horror is the critique of dominating comedic elements in these films. I argue, however, that the use of comedy helps align this subgenre more with mainstream horror, not further isolate it. One of the most recent examples of mainstream horror films that use comedy and horror is *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012). This film certainly recycles horror tropes and characters to create both moments of humor and horror; however, the comedic moments derived from generic parody do not eliminate the at times gruesome demise of the characters. This film balances comedy and horror and continues to be labeled and rated as a horror film. Mainstream horror has used comedy as a way to relieve tension, as well as a way to create complex narratives that are not stuck in constant horror mode.

It is imperative that children's animated horror film is not discredited due to its participation in comedy, but rather explored for its evolutionary incorporation of these elements. While some of these films are clearly more comedic than horror and others are more horror than comedic, this subgenre is producing films that balance the two elements in ways that echo mainstream horror. In no way would I posit that horror targeted toward children and horror targeted towards adults are the same or should be defined in the same manner; however, the mix of comedy and horror is present in films aimed towards both target audiences. Children's



animated horror films continue to change and adapt to reflect mainstream horror as much as they reflect the changes in children's media. While there are clear monster types in the cannon of children's animated horror films currently, I posit that the next five years of this subgenre will produce a children's film that echoes the sentiments of horror parodies that resemble *The Cabin in the Woods* more than *Scary Movie* (2000)

### **CHAPTER 3: IT'S ALIVE . . . AGAIN: CHILDREN'S HORROR FILM AND POSTMODERN TRAITS**

While once explored as “simple” and “didactic,” children’s animated films have embraced a postmodern paradigm, which has brought the subgenre much closer to mainstream Hollywood cinema. This analytical shift has allowed for children’s media and culture, in general, to be legitimized as worthwhile, escaping the negative associations that have so long plagued the field. In regard to children’s literature, Maria Nikolajeva argues that children’s literature’s exhibition of, “the most prominent features of postmodernism, such as genre eclecticism, disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity, and metafiction,” empowers the genre to close the gap between itself and mainstream literature (221). While children’s literature and film operate in diverse ways, both media’s adoption of postmodern elements frees children’s narratives from negative labels and enables a new approach that creates the space for a dialog between mainstream and children’s culture. As explored in this work, children’s animated horror films are a growing section of children’s media and culture, and thus are heavily influenced by the embrace of postmodern cinematic elements. The subgenre heavily relies on postmodernism’s concepts of pastiche and generic hybridity to blend elements of the past and present to ultimately reflect what Linda Hutcheon terms “the presence of the past” (4). Moreover, children’s animated horror films not only engage with postmodernism, in a general sense, but also more specifically they employ elements of postmodern horror, as explored by scholars such as Tania Modleski and Isabel Cristina Pinedo. While adopting generic postmodern paradigms helps legitimize children’s media, children’s animated horror film’s specific engagement with postmodern horror characteristics creates the opportunity to free the subgenre

from children's media and allows for it to be considered as part of mainstream horror, not as illegitimate or subservient.

## **POSTMODERN PARADIGMS AND CHILDREN'S MEDIA**

Postmodernism is an elusive category because it establishes boundaries and characteristics while simultaneously rejecting categorization as legitimate. Despite its contradictions, postmodernism stands as a cultural dominant affecting all products of mass culture. According to M. Keith Booker, "Postmodernism is now a cultural dominant and that even the most mundane products of popular culture are heavily conditioned by a postmodernist paradigm" (*Postmodern Hollywood* xvii). While this statement primarily addresses postmodern Hollywood cinema in general, Booker also asserts that Hollywood cinema of the 1980s came to bear on children's film (*Hidden Messages* vxiii); therefore, children's animated films are certainly included among the products that are heavily influenced by postmodern paradigms. C. Richard King contends that, "Animated features would draw on elements of what might be dubbed postmodernism to tell stories. Subsequent films became increasingly intertextual, ironic, irreverent, self-referential, and satiric" (26).

Critics praise big studios, such as DreamWorks Animation and Pixar, for employing the aforementioned techniques. Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche is the primary practice that children's films use in order to bridge the gap between mainstream and children's culture, as well as the children and adult audience members. According to Jameson, "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" (17). Unlike Linda Hutcheon, Jameson contends that parody is a modern impulse, which becomes nothing but

a code in the postmodern era. He famously argues that pastiche is, “the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion . . .” (18). Unlike parody, pastiche loses its connection with history and leaves us with simulacra in which “the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (Jameson 18). Many blockbuster children’s animated films such as *Shrek* and *WALL-E* famously echo generic conventions, instead of a historically or materially rooted subject. Booker argues,

“the practice of generic pastiche is part of a much broader postmodern phenomenon in which films increasingly take both their style and their subject matter from other cultural artifacts, rather than from anything in material reality. The most obvious aspect of this phenomenon is the increasing tendency of films, in a variety of ways, to take other motion pictures as their objects of representation. (*Postmodern Hollywood* 91)

Within this chapter, I will not examine each instance of pastiche within children’s animated horror films because the occurrence of this trait is prevalent in almost every contemporary children’s film, especially within genre cinema that has clear, defined characteristics to copy and reproduce. Each film within this subgenre uses pastiche in order to aesthetically and narratively align itself with mainstream horror, especially classic, Universal horror. Many film reviewers emphasize the pleasure adults can find within the subgenre if they have knowledge of a larger horror canon. There are even entire blogs, websites, and wikis dedicated to exploring the horror references found within the subgenre in order to connect the film with the larger, mainstream canon. Therefore, although I will not be exploring specific instances of pastiche, its abundance presence indicates that the postmodern paradigm does exist within children’s media, and specifically children’s animated horror films. The application of postmodern characteristics within children’s media helps bridge the gap between children’s cinema and the mainstream cinema.

In addition to pastiche, children's animated films employ the postmodern impulse of generic hybridity, ignoring traditional genre boundaries and mixing multiple genres into one narrative. Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb explore the effects of postmodernism in children's literature. The authors first contend, "postmodern strategies empower children as readers" (142). By creating narrative with multiplicity in content and generic characteristics, children approach the narrative with the power to create a meaning, not a universally true understanding. Just as with film, children's literature has attracted an adult audience beyond the role of guardian and narrative gatekeeper. Adults are beginning to flock to this genre, not because children need them too, but because the narrative content truly captures their interest. Cogan Thacker and Webb argue that, "the attraction of children's fiction for an adult audience can be seen as part of the postmodern condition" (147).

The primary rationale of the attraction of adult audiences to children's fiction lies in a critical shift that occurred once children's culture, as a whole, employed generic hybridity. Robert Haas asserts that before postmodern cinema, critics would examine films in terms of generic expectations; however, generic hybridity ushered in a new focus of audience expectations (73). While I do agree with Haas' observation regarding the shift of focus, I argue that generic hybridity has moved from looking at generic expectations to the multiplicity of generic interaction. The manner in which genres interact can be examined in an isolated approach, as well as its effect on audience expectations and entertainment value. The boundary blurring that generic hybridity creates has "led to the production of much more interesting and diverse children's films, a phenomenon that has continued over the past two decades, under the leadership of DreamWorks and Pixar" (Booker *Hidden Messages* xviii). The implementation of boundary blurring has created more complex narratives that can be examined in terms their

allegiance and challenges of multiple genres, as well as audience expectations. The employment of generic hybridity has helped move children's media from a mundane, simplistic entertainment for children to narratives that appeal to both children and adults with diverse expectations, overcoming the disparity between children's film and mainstream cinema.

## **GENERIC HYBRIDITY AND CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILMS**

Generic hybridity is endemic to the classic and postmodern horror genres. James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* combines concepts of science fiction with the monstrosity explored in horror film. Additionally, Tod Browning's 1931 *Dracula* touted the catchphrase "The Strangest Love Story of All" (Clarens 58). This early hybridity continued into the 1950s by blurring the line between science fiction and horror in films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Parodic horror films that combine horror and comedy began to become widely popular with Mel Brook's 1974 cult-classic *Young Frankenstein* and extended well into the 2000s with the *Scary Movie* franchise, as well as stand alone films such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Zombieland* (2009). The combination of genres in unique ways has created a path for horror to stay renewed and relevant, especially while recycling old monsters and narratives.

Children's animated horror films follow their mainstream predecessors by blurring the line between multiple genres and the horror genre, creating films that resemble other genres with somewhat equal frequency as the horror genre itself. While films like *Frankenweenie* primarily use pastiche as a way to participate within the horror genre, other films like *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit* blur the boundary between British humor and the literary and cinematic horror tradition to create a children's animated film that elicits laughter more than screams. Additionally, films such as Shane Acker's *9* are generically labeled outside of the

horror genre, but certainly have dark, scary moments and share many generic and aesthetic characteristics including dark visuals, suspenseful music, monsters and sidekicks. Though 9 is categorized as post-apocalyptic fiction by many film critics, this film, like many post-apocalyptic narratives, uses elements of horror to create the chaos and terror of a fallen world. Examining both of the aforementioned films expose children's animated horror films' use of generic hybridity to interact with and recreate the boundary blurring that makes mainstream horror a critically and financially successful genre.

### **WALLACE AND GROMIT: CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT**

Many children's animated film's are based on Universal monsters or children's literature known to elicit fear from children; however, Aardman Animations and DreamWorks Pictures, *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005) comes from the popular British short film series by Nick Park. The entire *Wallace and Gromit* franchise participates in the great British animated comedy genre spanning from the early 1900s lightning cartoon sketches through the 2000s with Joanna Quinn's 2003 *Calendar Girls*. An important distinction between British animation and American animation is the intended target audience. The primary reason this film constitutes a "children's film" is the tendency in American cinema to equate animation with children's entertainment. This impulse does not exist British cinema, where animated comedy has a wide audience that at times include children, but often target adult audiences by tackling adult issues, especially post-1980 with the rise of "quasi-feminist comedy" (Hunt and Porter).

The franchise centers on Wallace, an eccentric, optimistic, and at times naïve, inventor and his silent, but all-to knowledge dog, Gromit. Even with an underwhelming marketing strategy, the film went on to become a critical and commercial success in the U.S., winning the 2005 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-*

*Rabbit* centers on Tottington Hall's annual vegetable growing contest, which awards the Golden Carrot Award to one deserving winner; however, rabbits seem to be harming the vegetables. To combat the town problem, Wallace and Gromit, under their company name of Anti-Pesto Pest Control, attempt to humanly capture the rabbits; however, at the rate of rabbit reproduction, the company quickly realizes they are running out of room to keep the captured critters, so they attempt to brainwash the rabbits to act in an acceptable manner. In true comedic form, Wallace accidentally and unknowingly brainwashes himself and creates a monstrous sized rabbit, the "Were-Rabbit," who terrorizes the town far more than the tiny pests. In an attempt to catch the Were-Rabbit, Gromit discovers that Wallace is the monster just in time to start a farcical chase scene in an attempt to save Wallace from the film's villain, Victor. The end of the film concludes with Wallace returning to human form and Tottington Hall transforming into a rabbit sanctuary.

More than just an American children's horror film, The *Wallace and Gromit* franchise has deep roots in British television and cinema, especially British comedy. Its status as both children's entertainment (in America)? and British comedy leads to a double dismissal from many critics of popular culture. Laraine Porter and I.Q. Hunter outline the lack of critical attention given to the genre of British comedy in their collection *British Comedy Cinema*. They argue that, "Despite this richness [found in British comedy cinema], and its continuing ability to thrive in spite of low budgets and fickle audiences, British comedy cinema has never really had its due" (1). The scarcity of wide-spread critical attention in children's media and British comedy creates an interesting hybrid between the two genres in *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, which seems to contest the lack of critical attention due to its receipt of one of the highest accolades in American cinema: an Academy Award.



*Wallace and Gromit* playfully dabbles in the horror genre and the genre of British comedy to create a unique stop-motion animated film. The popularity of the film stems from its hybridity. First, *Wallace and Gromit* does not lose its British-ness when translated to American cinema. Hunter and Porter lay the framework for British comedy in the following manner: “British comedy can variously be classified as a comedy of class, social and sexual embarrassment, thwarted ambition and a love-hate relationship with convention, conformity and the Establishment in all its forms” (2). Additionally, Marcia Landy argues that, “In these narratives [British comedies], the complacency of the status quo and the rigidity of social structures is threatened by eruptions of physical and psychic energy” (333). *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit*, in addition to the animated short series, encapsulates a variety of these traits, which are the hallmark of British comedy. For example, the film is a comedy of class, focusing on a division between the working class and the gentry. Wallace and Gromit belong to the working class that defines the fictional town. Additionally, all of the townspeople have markers of lower or working class membership including torn/un-mended clothing, dirty, rough hands, and small, unrepaired homes. These signs of lower-class membership contrast with the splendor displayed in Tottington Hall and its leading matriarch, Lady Tottington, the only character with a gentry label in the film.

Furthermore, Wallace endures both social and sexual embarrassment during the film, especially in its conclusion. Wallace’s ability to provide his social service, humane animal removal, is questioned when the Were-Rabbit destroys many of the vegetable crops in the town and even causes a riot, which forces the town to turn to alternative measures. The film ends in sexual embarrassment as Wallace turns from the Were-Rabbit into a nude human being in front of both Gromit and Lady Tottington, his love interest. While he quickly covers, the blush of

embarrassment crosses his face and cannot be hidden from Lady Tottington or the viewing audience alike. The Were-Rabbit constantly disrupts the traditions of “the Establishment” in the film through physical, comedic disturbances. The Were-Rabbit destroys many local gardens, creates a commotion downtown ravaging for vegetables, and eventually chases fake female rabbit played by Gromit. His appearance at the annual contest creates frenzy and a town of pitchfork wielding citizens. Ultimately, the story concludes by attempting to gun-down the creature in order to return the town and its established rules and regulations to proper order.

With the teamwork between Aardman Animations and DreamWorks Pictures, *Wallace and Gromit* has become a hit for primarily a children’s audience in the United States, and has since had a global presence, especially in Japan (Youngs). In addition to becoming a hybrid of British comedy and children’s film, the content of the film opens up the ability to create an even more complex hybridity by mixing the horror genre with the other two seemingly disparate genres. The combination of the three distinct genres has created a film that contains elements of classic horror, but is received largely as a comedy for American children. The elements and characteristics of horror, specifically werewolf lore, anchor the content of the film. From the title, which directly alludes to “were” lore to the transformation of the creature itself echoes classic gothic British literature, as well as early Universal cinema such as *The Wolf Man* (1941), more contemporary cult classics like John Landis’ *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), and popular young adult franchises in the 2000s including J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. After some encounter with a werewolf, or in Wallace’s case a rabbit, the seemingly normal human being transforms in the dead of night, generally on the night of a full moon, and terrorizes individuals or entire towns and causes destruction. For many were-stories, these humans are often unaware

of the damage that occurs during the transformation, which explains why Wallace is oblivious to his destructive actions during a majority of the film.

Additionally, the film also contains the stock characters found in horror and gothic fiction. Gromit is clearly the hero's sidekick, though Wallace is not the typical Romantic or Byronic hero. He resembles a normal protagonist in a children's film, not a moody or self-centered protagonist native in British Gothic literature. Gromit also plays the role of the femme fatale, when he assumes the actions of a female rabbit, intended to lure and destroy the Were-Rabbit. A rifle and bad toupee mark the gothic villain, Victor, who attempts to separate Wallace and Lady Tottington, and ultimately desires to kill Wallace. Lady Tottington resembles the stock character of the persecuted maiden or damsel in distress. She needs a hero to save not only the annual contest, but also save her the malicious intent of the villain. Finally, Wallace himself presents a monster, which while fuzzy and vegetable hungry, poses a threat to the town and the everyday life of its citizens. Instead of drawing only on cinematic horror, the film heavily uses the stock characters of British Victorian Gothicism to create the horror in the film.

The stock characters are not the only inclusion from the Victorian tradition; the film also aesthetically resembles British Gothicism found in the novels of Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and G.W.M. Reynolds. While *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* does not focus on the interior or exterior gothic architecture inherent in the genre, the film focuses on the tie between horror, a Were-Rabbit, and romance. Furthermore, the film uses a dark, muted pallet that helps create an eerie atmosphere. The aesthetics of the film rely on shadows of the creature, which serve as a gothic doubling between the monster and Wallace, much in the same vein of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Furthermore, the use of fog not only hints at the British setting, but is also used to conceal the physical manifestation of the monster at the beginning of the film.

Despite its adherence to traditional British Gothicism, as well as early Universal horror, *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* remains a horror-comedy in public opinion. *Variety*'s Leslie Felperin declares, "'Curse' [of the *Were-Rabbit*] delivers a wholesome morsel, happily not too cheesy, that families will nibble on as a treat." Furthermore, *Premiere*'s Glenn Kenny states, "This [film] is more than just the best animated comedy of the year--it's the best comedy of the year, period." These reviews, in addition the hundreds more, reflect the public perception of this film as a comedy, rather than a straight horror film; however, in reviews, including Claudia Puig's *USA Today* film review, the elements of the horror or gothic are mentioned; however, they ultimately give way to the overall wholesomeness and family-friendly laughter that the film presents. The complex hybridity between British comedy, literary and cinematic horror, and children's film creates a narrative that fits within the children's animated horror film subgenre, but asks audiences to laugh, rather than scream in terror.

## **9 (2009)**

While I did not include Shane Acker's 2009 stop-motion animated film, *9*, on the list of children's animated horror films, the film certainly contains elements that are horrifying, even to an adult audience. Film critics categorize this film as post-apocalyptic fiction, one whose content is targeted toward a more mature audience. James Berardinelli of *ReelViews* classifies this film as an action-packed, post-apocalyptic narrative aimed toward a teen audience; however, the medium of the film, stop-motion animation, has led to the classification of the audience as children. The plot and aesthetic composition of *9* resembles a combination of Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* and Pixar's 2008 *WALL-E*. Set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland of Earth, *9* centers on the awakening of a "Stitchpunk" doll referred to as 9. All the doll characters in the film do not have traditional names, but rather are identified by a numerical system 1-9. 9 discovers that a

scientist created a thinking robot, B.R.A.I.N.; however, an evil dictator incorporated this technology and used it to produce a machine, The Fabrication Machine, designed to produce other machines to destroy enemy armies. This technology eventually becomes sentient and decides that instead of eliminating the enemy, its new goal is to destroy life on Earth. Eventually, The Fabrication Machine eradicates all life and landscape on Earth, with the exception of 9 “Stitchpunk” dolls. These dolls venture into the wasteland to attempt to stop the remaining machine and slowly rebuild life on Earth. This mission is unsuccessful and culminates in the loss of life, as well as the re-awakening of The Fabrication Machine, which simply creates more machines to attempt to destroy the dolls. After returning to a safe haven, 9 discovers a holographic message from the inventor explaining the history of the machine and the way to stop the machine. Additionally, the inventor reveals that each doll is a part of the inventor himself, and it will take the dolls’ collective effort to destroy the machine and bring life back to Earth. The remaining dolls work together to destroy the machine, freeing the already entrapped dolls. While the film concludes with a pan over shot of the dystopian wasteland, it begins to rain, signaling a certain amount of hope; the raindrops contain flecks of glowing bacteria-like material, indicating that life on Earth is a possibility for the future.

This quick plot summation indicates that this film aligns itself with the post-apocalyptic tradition. While adult post-apocalyptic fiction has been present in cinema for decades, there has been a substantial surge in adolescent and children’s post-apocalyptic films. Children’s films such as *9* and *WALL-E* predated adolescent blockbusters based on YA novels, such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner* franchises. John Walliss and James Aston investigate the resurgence of apocalyptic fiction in a post- 9/11, world. While they acknowledge that this fiction is not new, they contend that there has “been a significant increase in apocalyptic

imagery and themes post-9/11 across a variety of popular media” (54). The films produced post-9/11 that contain “cinematic representations of the apocalypse have been much more pessimistic post-9/11, demonstrating that Hollywood sci-fi can facilitate wider socio-political concerns while providing the expected spectacular audio-visual displays” (Walliss and Aston 55). While Walliss and Aston do not explore children or adolescent post-apocalyptic narratives, the pessimism discussed in their larger scope is equally applicable. Even the end of *9* contains a bit of hope, but nowhere near the optimism of a “happily-ever-after.” *Boston Globe* film critic Wesley Morris states, Any optimism in *9*, which is bound to try the fortitude of meeker children, feels hard-won. It actually ends in a bittersweet mystery.” Unlike many children’s films, *9* presents an ending that does not include a typical Disney narrative closure.

Though *9* is undoubtedly post-apocalyptic, it contains many elements of the horror genre as well. The combination between post-apocalyptic narrative and horror is typical, especially in popular subgenres such as zombie films. As discussed in the introduction, children’s films, even without classification of horror, can create feelings of terror, for example the evil deeds performed in fairy tales by monstrous villains. Moreover, there is a strong history of generic hybridity between the horror genre and the science fiction genre. Post-apocalyptic narratives are a specific subgenre of science fiction, generally concerned with the ending of human civilization and/or Earth. Therefore, the fact that *9* feels like a horror film and incorporates characteristics of the genre is not an unpredictable conclusion. Unlike *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit*, *9* incorporates elements of horror without being labeled a horror film. This fact is primarily due to its firm roots in post-apocalyptic fiction and its similarity with the horror genre. *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit* blends two distinct and diverse genres, which result in content that reflects shared references with the horror genre, but not actually the feeling

of horror. Conversely, *9* firmly participates in the post-apocalyptic subgenre, which while separate from horror, shares many of the same traits. Therefore, this generic hybridity can create a film that feels horrific, but is actually classified outside of the horror genre.

One of the largest characteristics *9* derives from the horror genre is the use of the monster to create chaos and fear in the characters and the viewing audience. The Fabrication Machine and all of its creations are machines that aesthetically create fear through the depiction industrial participation such as steam, fire, and heat. While some of the machines resemble domesticated animals, like a cat, and others resemble more menacing creatures, such as spiders, all of the creations are monstrous in appearance and deed. Much like Noël Carroll's definition, these monsters actually pose a threat to the "Stitchpunk" dolls and serve as the primary obstacle to the repopulation of Earth. In order for hope to prevail, the dolls, especially the protagonist *9*, must defeat the monster and remove the threat. The film also contains all of the horror character types of the protagonist, monster, victim, and sidekicks explored in chapter two of this project. The combination reflects character types in other popular animated horror films such as *Monster House* and *Coraline*. Lastly, while the film resembles a post-apocalyptic wasteland it could easily be the setting for a horror film with its muted, dark colors, blemished appearance, and presence of spaces of fear as well as spaces of security. Unlike *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit*, *9* is an example of the ways in which generic hybridity can be employed and the film feel like horror, but be classified within another subgenre of cinema. The various ways to combine genres that lead to a diverse classification of the films indicate that children's animated horror films employ the postmodern trait of generic hybridity in order to create complex films that mirror mainstream cinematic conventions and classification difficulties. The blurring of definite boundaries is just one way that this subgenre is participating in a dialogue with

mainstream cinema and deserves critical attention for the way in which it engages in these mainstream conventions.

## **POSTMODERN HORROR**

General characteristics of postmodernism, such as pastiche and generic hybridity, work towards legitimizing children's media overall. Specifically, children's animated horror films engage with elements of postmodern horror cinema, which helps further classify it as both children's film and horror film. The term postmodern horror can be tenuous to define. When categorizing horror film, labeling one film as classic horror and another as postmodern becomes challenging. Though there are differences between classic and postmodern films, one cannot draw a line using a particular year that designates the distinction. Critics such as Tania Modleski and Isabel Cristina Pinedo acknowledge this difficulty, but both scholars define postmodern horror films as "those horror films produced since about 1968" (Pinedo 85). Modleski's 1986 essay "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory," questions the basic assumptions of postmodern theory using specific contemporary horror films. The biggest convention Modleski challenges is the concept that "mass culture is the realm of pleasure and serves as the support for bourgeois ideology, reinforcing and sustaining the bourgeois ego" (xvii). Instead of supporting the common opposition between mass culture and high culture, Modleski argues that contemporary horror films, in true postmodern fashion, are hostile to "meaning, form, [and] pleasure" and require us to question the "adversarial position" between the two forms (xvii). According to her argument, contemporary horror films challenge the dichotomy because they are a piece of mass culture, but due to their postmodern fragmentation and genre blurring, challenge mass culture in much the same way that high-art does.



Unlike Modleski, Pinedo does not attempt to challenge existing cultural structures or attempt to question the pleasurable qualities of the contemporary horror genre as pleasure, but rather she divides horror cinema itself into two different categories, classic and postmodern, and examines the effect of postmodernism on the structure of the genre. Pinedo argues, “the postmodern horror film transgresses the rules of the classically oriented horror genre, but in doing so it also retains some features of the classical genre such that it is possible to see and appreciate the transgression” (88). She asserts that despite the breadth of the horror genre, that there are five aspects that define the postmodern horror genre: “ 1.) Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world. 2.) Horror transgresses and violates boundaries. 3.) Horror throws into question the validity of rationality. 4.) Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure. 5.) Horror produces a bounded experience of fear” (90-91). She contends that both classic and postmodern horror films engage with elements 1-3 and 5. Though they both exhibit traits outlined in these four categories, they do so in distinct ways. Pinedo argues that category 4, the repudiation of narrative closure, is unique to postmodern horror films. While the integration of standard postmodern elements into children’s film helps create more interesting texts, children’s animated horror film’s specific engagement with postmodern horror, as outlined by Pinedo, serves to bridge the division between the subgenre and mainstream horror, creating the critical space to legitimize children’s animated horror film outside of children’s media. I will use Pinedo's five characteristics of horror films as well as her distinction between classic horror and postmodern horror within each individual category in order to examine both *Frankenweenie's* and *ParaNorman's* engagement with postmodern horror. Their participation in the postmodern horror genre emphasizes the significance of children’s animated horror films not only in the category of children's film, but also in the cinematic horror genre as a whole.

## **HORROR IS A VIOLENT DISRUPTION OF EVERYDAY WORLD**

Pinedo argues that violence is necessary to the horror genre because “violence disrupts the world of everyday life; it explodes our assumptions about normality” (91). She posits that classic horror locates the violence in a distant location, far from the viewer's reality, while postmodern horror “treats violence as a constituent element of everyday life” (91). Exploring classic horror and current slasher films illuminates this difference. Universal monster movies from the 1930s and 1940s starred actors like Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. These films featured foreign monsters, in foreign lands, with foreign accents. The dangers in these films were located far from the viewing audience; however, slasher films bring the horror to everyday settings like summer camps and suburban neighborhoods, casting American teen idols, and using humans, not monsters, as the force of terror. The origin of the violence is the key distinction between classic horror and postmodern horror; thus, the setting of *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman* is paramount to determine their engagement with postmodern horror.

In *Frankenweenie*, Burton chooses to set the film in the fictional space of New Holland. Though New Holland, PA, is an actual town, Burton creates a fictional New Holland. This town generically stands in for American suburbia at large, much like Burton's setting for *Edward Scissorhands*. The physical location of the town is not exotic or removed from a setting with which viewers are familiar. In fact, the cookie-cutter houses, perfectly manicured lawns, and yearly town celebrations feel all too familiar. The fact that Burton leaves the town generic allows the audience to bring the location even closer to home, superimposing their experiences of suburbia. In addition to physical location, temporal setting also influences the connection to everyday life. The aesthetics of *Frankenweenie* suggests a temporal marker in the late 1950s – early 1960s. This period is most evidenced by the costuming of the characters, the hairstyles of

the adult women, the appliances and decorations in the Frankenstein's home, and the emphasis on male workers and female domestic duties. Additionally, the film opens with Victor showing one of his movies shot on Super 8MM film, which was instituted in 1965. Moreover, one evening both Mr. and Mrs. Frankenstein are at home watching a movie, *House of Dracula*, from 1958. The temporal setting of the movie may not seem everyday to its younger target audience; however, the setting is still familiar due in part to the cannibalization of 1950s/1960s styles found in popular culture. Furthermore, the film uses anachronistic terminology on several occasions, bringing the film closer to the everyday life of its audience. For example, Toshiaki and Bob experiment with a bottle propulsion system for the science fair. Bob asks Toshiaki why they cannot run a simple computer simulation instead of running an experiment that endangers him. Moreover, in the parent/teacher meeting held to discuss the science curriculum and instructor, a parent objects to the content in a textbook because it states "Pluto is no longer a planet," a distinction NASA announced in 2006. While the setting of the film is in the 1950s and 1960s, the postmodern element of temporal boundary blurring and cannibalization of past styles through pastiche allows the language and anachronistic references to be synthesized and co-exist.

In addition to the setting, the type of violence that occurs in this film disrupts the everyday life of not only the Frankenstein family, but also the larger community. The violence occurs in the middle of a baseball game, so it literally interrupts "America's pastime." An animal being hit by a car is also an event with which many audience members can identify and actually feel the disruption of pain and loss. Pinedo argues that classic horror tells of bodily harm, while postmodern horror engages in "the act of showing the spectacle of the ruined body" (92). The film does not show Sparky being hit by a car; however, it does not simply tell this fact either. We see the dog run across the street to fetch a ball, we see a car, and then we see the ball roll across

the street and the owner of the car gets out in a frantic state. The film cannot engage in the gore that comes with violent spectacle because of the young target audience. A&E's *Bates Motel* was able to show the graphic image of Norman Bates dog, Juno, tumbling under a moving vehicle because the show is targeted toward an older audience. While *Frankenweenie* cannot actually show the contact between the car and Sparky, the film does capitalize on the real nightmare of losing a beloved pet and creates a space for personal engagement by letting the audience fill in the absent visuals. This type of connection could not be obtained by a voice-over narration of the event.

Much like *Frankenweenie*, Sam Fell and Chris Butler set the action of *ParaNorman* in a fictional space: Blithe Hollow, Massachusetts. Though this town is set in a real state, it generically represents New England with a focus on witches and a Puritan past. Instead of representing suburbia, this town engages with the politics and rituals found in small, non-rural towns. Again, this town does not seem removed from reality, but rather represents many elements of everyday life including dysfunctional families, houses in disrepair, and the challenges of attending public school. Not only does the film seem to connect to some version of reality, it also associates with American history in a way that bridges the past with the present. Instead of simply studying the metanarrative of the Salem Witch Trials, these historical experiences become the lived experiences of the protagonist, who exists in the "present," as well as the past through a series of visions. Norman is able to bridge the historical gap and make the entire setting seem part of the everyday world.

Additionally, *ParaNorman*'s temporal setting allows the film to resonate with the feeling of the contemporary, everyday world. Though the plot does not specify any dates, the film resembles and feels much like a 1980s B-horror film. The absurd meta-film that opens the

narrative alludes to horror in the 1980s. Furthermore, the costuming of the characters, in their plaid, velour jump suits, and loose t-shirts mimic the fashion of the 1980s. In a comic scene, Neil views his mom's exercise DVD with a Thighmaster, advertised heavily in American culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Suzanne Somers. This world may seem dated to a younger audience; however, to the unhidden adult audience, this setting is an all-to-familiar flashback to the recent past. There are also moments that propel the film from the 1980s to the present in true anachronistic fashion. The largest modernization of the 1980s is the presence of contemporary cell phones in the film, specifically the ability for Norman to have a customized ringtone from John Carpenter's *Halloween*. Though the film undoubtedly feels like a 1980s film, its modernization and horror merchandising feels much like the contemporary world.

The violent disruptions that occur in the film happen personally to and through Norman, but also during major town events and in public spaces. Norman's power as a medium opens the young protagonist up to disruptions of the everyday world by inserting powerful visions into normal situations like a play rehearsal or performance; however, Norman's special talent does not produce violent disruptions. The most violent disruptions occur in the town center; Agatha, appearing as a traditional witch, storms over the city center of Blithe Hollow. This public appearance disrupts the yearly town celebration, which is one of the few communal past times in the film. During this interruption, both the witch, Agatha, and the zombies invade the town square and create a riot, which results in townspeople wielding pitchforks and torches.

As Agatha's history is revealed to the audience, we discover the most heinous, violent disruption also occurred in public space. Agatha's witch trial happened in the town center and her death sentence was handed down and executed there as well. While the 1700s seem disconnected to the everyday world in the film, Norman and Agatha's function as doubles help

transfer the hurt, trauma, and injustice done to Agatha to Norman's character, who faces less harsh versions of public persecution through peer bullying. The socially-sanctioned murder of a child in a the public sphere certainly constitutes as a violent disruption, one that will continue to ripple for 300 years and ultimately stops due to Agatha's recognition of her violent actions.

The setting of both films, geographical and temporal, and the nature of the deaths and destructions that occur illustrate the violent disruption of everyday life. While Sparky is killed during the great American past time, Agatha is killed and tortures the town during the yearly town celebration. The terror in these films does not come from a foreign land or monster; it originates in a familiar space, time, and event. The generic physical settings, historical and contemporary periods, and socially sanctioned activities set the most violent occurrences of the films in the realm of the everyday. Of course, day-to-day suburban life is horrifying in many ways, and the disruption of the ordinary lived suburban experience could be considered an improvement, rather than a detriment. The "keeping up with the Jones" fueled consumerism coupled with generic, identical house plans create suburbia, a space that attempts to create unity and dispel otherness. This lived existence for many Americans presents a perfect backdrop for many horror movies including Brian De Palma's 1976 classic *Carrie* and teen-slasher franchises such as *Halloween* (1978) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). The combination of terror and suburbia often highlights the horror that lurks underneath the idyllic façade of suburban spaces. Thus the disruptions, while only temporary, serve as a reprieve from the generic unity created in the suburbs and allows otherness to reign, if only for a short time. One of the major points of contention with Pinedo's characterization is that these films do not show all of the physical gore of postmodern horror films. Truly, any film classified as children's entertainment must limit the exposure to grotesque, bodily fluids due to the G or PG rating. Though these films do not mirror

the gore that Pinedo suggests is necessary, the films' violent disruptions of the everyday world does fulfill the parameters defining this specific category as postmodern, not classic, horror.

### **HORROR TRANSGRESSES AND VIOLATES BOUNDARIES**

As suggested by the previous category, the disruption of natural order is a requirement in the horror genre. One of horror's tools for disrupting the natural and violating boundaries is the dissolution of binary systems through the body of the monster. Pinedo argues that classical and postmodern horror both transgress boundaries, but she argues there are two essential differences. These differences are observed in the moral value system of the narrative, as well as the film's resolution of conflict (94). Pinedo defines the differences in the following manner:

The classical paradigm draws relatively clear boundaries between the contending camps of good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle almost invariably entails the destruction of the monster. . . In contrast, the postmodern paradigm blurs the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle is at best ambiguous. (94)

For Pinedo, the boundaries that horror must transgress are socially constructed and enforced binary value systems. On the surface, Pinedo's assertion appears correct; however, Whale's *Frankenstein* itself could be seen as modernist horror, instead of classic horror, and Boris Karloff's depiction of the 1931 monster is a sympathetic character and shows the true moral ambiguity. Both of these observations indicate that the opposition between "classic" and "postmodern" horror is more complex than the binary value system that Pinedo attempts to superimpose. However, using Pinedo's somewhat faulty distinction, both *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman* transgress the boundaries of the binary system, especially in the portrayal of their respective monsters.

The reanimated Sparky in *Frankenweenie* physically resembles the creature from *Frankenstein*. After the accident, visually the film is asking the audience to label the dog as the

monster and not a beloved family pet. On the one hand, the film presents a cute and cuddly four-legged friend. On the other hand, once the dog has been reanimated, the filmmakers force the audience to view the dog differently. At first, the film presents Sparky exhibiting the same traits as before the accident; however, we see other members of the community interpret the dog as a monster. The first person to encounter the dog in public is Bob's mother. When she is hanging the laundry out to dry, she looks over and sees a shadow of Sparky. At first, the shadow looks like a normal dog, but it quickly morphs into an unidentifiable monster much like a transformation of a werewolf. Later, Sparky walks through the park and scares a young infant. Lastly, Mr. Burgemeister accuses Sparky of harming his niece, Elsa, which results in an impromptu mob forming and chasing Sparky to the windmill. While the dog performs good actions, the film constructs Sparky as one of the monsters. As an audience member, labeling the good-natured, reanimated dog as evil is difficult, but his adapted position makes him into an other. Sparky's complicated position transgresses the black and white lines of good and evil; he demonstrates good behavior, but looks like a monster.

In addition to the transgression of good and evil, the film also transgresses the formal boundaries of normal and abnormal through the human characters in the film, specifically the students of New Holland Elementary. Most of the elementary students are based on famous characters from Universal horror movies. For instance, Nassor resembles Frankenstein's creature minus the bolts and sewn together flesh. His awkward movements and creepy tone of voice echo Boris Karloff's creature, not a young boy. Edgar "E" Gore (Igor) resembles the stereotypical sidekick in many classic horror films. He has a hunched back, incredibly crooked teeth, an identifiable lisp, and a maniacal laugh. Next, there is the generic character of the "weird girl," whose blank eyes are meant to unsettle the audience. Her dress and hairstyle vaguely resemble



the twin girls from *The Shining*. These monstrous elementary school students are juxtaposed to “normal” humans like Victor, Elsa, Bob, and many of the adults in the film. Though the children look like the famous Universal monsters, they are not classified as monstrous. Their physical appearance does transgress the boundary between human and monster, and thus transgresses the strict binary between normal and abnormal. In classic horror movies, these children would be considered “the other” and hunted and killed to restore the natural order; however, in this postmodern text, these children look abnormal, but there is no attempt to either destroy them or force them into normalcy.

Lastly, the film’s ending does not restore the social order that was present before the monster arrived. As many horror scholars argue, classic horror film relied on the death of the monster in order to restore the natural order at the end of the film. In the classic 1931 *Frankenstein*, the audience leaves feeling that the monster is defeated, burning in the collapsing windmill. However, *Frankenweenie* specifically ends with the “monster” fully alive. While the other animals that turned into monsters during the course of the film die, the film revives Sparky one final time at the end with the help of the adult characters, jumper cables, and automobiles. A return to normal social order would eliminate all of the monsters from narrative space; however, Sparky lives to bark another day. Some might argue that Sparky is not dangerous; therefore, he is not a danger to the social order. While Sparky does not pose a physical danger, a reanimated pet corpse walking through town is far from a restoration of social normalcy. While the reanimation of Sparky might seem positive and certainly delivers on the Disney happy ending, it does not restore that boundary of social order needed to restore normalcy or a binary system.

*ParaNorman* blurs the boundary between good/evil and normal/abnormal; however, the film does so conversely to *Frankenweenie*. Most notably, the monster of *ParaNorman*, Agatha,

makes her first appearance as a monster, not an innocent character like Sparky. The audience knows little information about the witch with the exception of Norman's uncle, who knows the secret to pacifying the monster lies in reading her a book of fairytales. After Norman is unsuccessful at placating the witch, she enters the town center to make her menacing presence known and represents a true threat to the everyday life of the citizens. In this moment, the witch switches from the role of town myth to true monster. It is not until her manifestation in the town square that Norman has a vision that indicates that the witch is actually Agatha, a young girl who the town council wrongly sentenced to death because of her powers as a medium. This vision is the first moment in the film that the witch is given human identification, and thus the first occurrence of the narrative blurring the boundary between good and evil by blurring the boundary between monster and human, as well as evil and innocent.

The blurring between good and evil continues as Norman approaches Agatha's grave. During this interaction, Agatha separates Norman from his group and communicates with him in a spirit dimension. The aesthetics of this scene suggest that Agatha's power is evil, even though she takes the form of a young girl, not a crooked-nosed witch. As Norman's pleads upset her more, she glows yellow with electrical currents and eventually uses her physical power to cast Norman into a tree. While this scene shows the true power and capability of Agatha, her connection to childhood blurs the boundary between her ill-actions and her immaturity. Her reaction to Norman seems to resemble a young girl throwing a tantrum because she is not getting her way. After enduring physical and verbal assault at the hands of Agatha, Norman uses an emotional appeal and suggests that someone must have been nice to Agatha during her life. The young girl flashes back to her childhood and the audience sees a young, happy child making happy memories with her mother. This moment removes Agatha's monstrosity and replaces it

with childhood happiness. Eventually, Agatha relinquishes her vengeance and is able to pass into the next world with peace. The climax of the film, as well as the resolution, works towards blurring the lines between good and evil by presenting a monster that enacts physical harm, but also maintains the innocence and representation of a childhood.

In addition to blurring the lines of good/evil, this film, even with its title, challenges common conceptions of normalcy. The typical horror title would include the term “paranormal” to denote events or actions outside of scientific rationalization; however, this film replaces the word “normal” in the title with “Norman,” a character who is constantly defined as abnormal. The character of Norman single-handedly blurs notions of the abnormal and normal by assuming the position of protagonist, as well as possessing an ability that positions him as an abnormal outcast. In this way, his social abnormality becomes normalized to the audience even though it remains abnormal to the other characters in the film. Thus, the characters in the film define Norman as abnormal, while the film asks the audience to see this character as a normal child. The end of the film, once and for all, presents Norman as normal because he is finally accepted within his own community as well as the viewing audience. Norman does not change his behavior. Contrarily, Norman uses his ability as a medium to resolve a conflict that has plagued the town for centuries. His public display of his abilities leads to acceptance. In order to be accepted, Norman does not have to relinquish his powers, but rather the town must accept him under the moral message that “it is okay to be different.”

The conclusion of the film appears straightforward and resolute. The witch is released, the zombies returned to the grave, and the town is free of the monstrosity that disrupted its everyday world. The “tidy” conclusion seems to work against this film’s participation within the postmodern paradigm; it reinforces the film’s categorization as a children’s film by ridding the

film of the threat and presenting a “happily-ever-after.” While this film does not present an ambiguous ending, it certainly works against the traditional Disney ending. Some of the tension created by the boundary blurring is allowed to remain. Norman, even though he achieves hero status, does not have a girlfriend, nor does he linger around the town center to accumulate accolades. Rather, he retreats with his friend, Neil, and continues the life he had before the disruption. In one way, this ending is the ultimate narrative closure; however, due to Norman’s paranormal abilities, the ending is not normalized. The spirits of the neighborhood, including his own grandmother, still exist and Norman still interacts with those spirits. The ending of the film is resolute, but it is not a return to complete normalcy because normalcy did not exist to begin the narrative. In many ways, the film works to challenge the very notion and existence of normal. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault examines the creation of the category of normal and the power that label holds. He argues:

The Normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of standardized education . . . it is established in the effort to organize a national medical profession and hospital system capable of operating general norms of health; it is established in the standardization of industrial processes and products . . . Like surveillance and with it, normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age. For the marks that once indicated status, privilege, and affiliation were increasingly replaced—or at least supplemented—by a whole range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogeneous social body, but also playing a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank (184).

Foucault focuses on the category of normal as a creation by which people are measured. The category of normal also implies an opposite category of abnormal. The category of normal exists as a method of control and exclusion. *ParaNorman* posits a protagonist that defies the categorization of normal, but is not demonized or excluded due to his abnormality. While all the characters display some physical feature of abnormality due to the animation style, they are all “abnormal” together, which creates a norm to measure Norman against. By the film’s end,

Norman still embodies characteristics that other characters label as abnormal; however, he and his abnormal medium ability are accepted and acclimated into society, not excluded or dispelled. While the film's critique of normalcy is not fully developed, it hints at the created nature, rather than natural occurrence, of normal and abnormal and the power each category holds. The unsure stance on normalcy helps the film embrace and maintain boundary blurring, which helps express the postmodern rejection of clear categorization and impulse to blur boundaries to challenge existing dichotomous power structures.

Both *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman* engage with the postmodern tendency to blur boundaries, especially in horror, with regards to good/evil and normal/abnormal. While *Frankenweenie* does so by creating a monster that is cuddly, but turns monstrous, *ParaNorman* displays a monster who is evil, but revealed to be a child victim. Furthermore, secondary characters, in the case of *Frankenweenie*, or the main character, in the example of *ParaNorman*, work to challenge notions of normalcy and the acceptance of the abnormal. Both films present endings that seem to fall short Pinedo's assertion that postmodern horror has ambiguous endings. Due to their participation in children's entertainment, narrative closure is normal; however, both films are granted the ability to maintain some level of abnormality, which serves as a bridge between classic childhood endings and the irresolute conclusions of mainstream horror. The fact that both films complicate and blur the division between good/evil, normal/abnormal, and refuse a complete return to social normalcy situates the films within the paradigm of postmodern horror, which grants them the space to engage even further with mainstream horror.

## **HORROR QUESTIONS RATIONALITY**

Pinedo defines one feature of the horror genre as the audience's confrontation of the irrational. She argues, "The realm of rationality represents the ordered, intelligible universe that

can be controlled or predicted. In contrast, the irrational represents the disordered, ineffable, chaotic, and unpredictable universe that constitutes the underside of life” (95). Pinedo differentiates classic and postmodern horror in this category by examining how or if rationality is restored at the end of the narrative. She contends that classic-era horror films use science and military force to return the rational order, while postmodern horror is unable to overcome the disruption of the irrational (95).

*Frankenweenie* is a film that is centered on the power of science. Mr. Rzykruski, the film's science teacher, heavy-handedly discusses the power of science to Victor. Rzykruski states that science can be used for good and evil, that true scientists are concerned with questions, and that people like what science can give them. These types of scientific speeches try to engender a type of rational thinking into the film. In fact, Victor uses his notes from science class to create the experiment that leads to the reanimation of Sparky; however, this film also hints at science as irrationality.

Classic horror films use science to restore rationality; however, *Frankenweenie* classifies science into the realm of the irrational, letting go of a need for strict rationality. The most prominent example of science as an irrational discourse occurs when Mr. Rzykruski tells Victor that, “people think science is in here [points to head], but it is also in here [points to heart].” This sentimental moment serves to explain why Victor can reanimate the pet he loves, but he is unsuccessful when experimenting on Edgar's fish; he simply isn't using the science both in his head AND his heart. Science is fickle, not rational. Victor uses the same formula, but he does not account for the variable of human emotion and connection. Mr. Rzykruski also compares science to the supernatural when he declares, “Science is magic and witchcraft because you [the parents] have such small minds.” This statement implies that science is rational, but misunderstood

because of the limited knowledge of the parents. However, science as a tool that creates and confirms the reanimation of corpses still appears to be more of an irrationality than scientific fact. The end of the film uses science, the art of rationality and irrationality, to jump-start Sparky back to life. The town does not allow the windmill fire to burn out the physical embodiment of irrationality, but rather uses science to allow that embodiment to continue “living.” The blurring of science as rational and irrational allows for the continuation of the irrational to occur. Sparky continues to live because the townspeople choose the irrational reanimated corpse over a return to rationality. More realistically, Sparky lives because he is in a Disney film. The happily ever after of Disney always includes a little magic, even if the film promotes the rational discourse of science. The rejection of a rational ending allows this film to participate within the postmodern horror genre because the film is unable to overcome the disruption of the irrational.

Unlike *Frankenweenie*, *ParaNorman* does not attempt to insert rationality through science into the core of the narrative. From the outset, the protagonist possesses an unexplainable power to communicate with those spirits who have not, for whatever reason, passed to the other side. Not only does Norman’s status as a medium reflect an unexplainable world, but the presence of a spirit world within the real world also confirms that the world is comprised of irrational elements that are not easily ordered or explained by scientific reasoning. Additionally, Norman has a series of visions that reveal the past and present to him. These visions often take place in public spaces, such as a school auditorium. These visions create a reason for the town to label Norman as weird and/or crazy. The townspeople, themselves, are not cognitively convinced of Norman’s paranormal abilities. The town categorizes Norman and his behavior as abnormal because they cannot rationally explain Norman’s actions.

Not only does Norman's status as a medium create an entrance for irrational elements in the film, but Agatha's inclusion and pacification also allows for scenes to occur that have no rational explanation. Before Agatha enters to terrorize the town, Norman encounters a small hoard of zombies who seemingly chase him from the cemetery to the town center. Zombies are currently a major part of popular culture, and there have been many ways to attempt to explain their existence, most currently in AMC's *The Walking Dead* where all humans are infected with a disease that allows them to turn to zombies after their corporeal death; however, within *ParaNorman* the resurrection and existence of these colonial re-creations remain unexplained. While their purpose of correcting their mistakes is clear, no scientific explanation is posited for their ability to resurrect. In a similar vein, there is never an attempt to rationalize Agatha's apparition as a witch or powers used against the town. In *Frankenweenie*, an attempt to explain the "monster," Sparky resonates for most of the latter half of the film; however, Agatha's status and power as a witch is never scientifically explained.

The ending of the film reinforces the notion that the narrative embraces, rather than challenges, irrationality. Science does not contribute to Agatha's demise. In fact, Norman's empathetic attitude and ability to communicate with her in a personal manner allows for Agatha to see the errors of her vengeful ways and willingly relinquish her grudge and enter into the afterlife with peace and serenity. Once Agatha is eternally pacified, the colonial zombies fade away since they accomplish their mission of righting their centuries old error. The resolution of the film is not reached through science or rationality, but rather an exercise in the irrational. The townspeople turn from rejecting Norman and his irrational ability to accepting and heralding him as a town hero. This championing does not require Norman to change to a rational, young boy,



but rather requires the town to change and embrace the unpredictable chaos endemic to irrationality.

Both *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman* refuse to remove the disruption of irrationality by the end of their respective films. Since *Frankenweenie* roots itself within classic Universal horror films, there is at least an attempt to use science and physical force to restore rationality in the narrative; however, ultimately the Disney happily-ever-after ending requires that the monster survive, despite its irrational creation. *ParaNorman* initially contains the irrationality, and there is no effort on the part of the film to rationalize Norman, his powers, or the presence of the supernatural witch or zombies. Instead of connecting itself to classic horror, *ParaNorman* follows a long zombie film tradition started in 1968 with George A. Romero's *Night of the Living the Dead*, which still persists in current popular culture. Both of these films participate within the paradigm of postmodern horror by ultimately ending with the reign of irrationality, instead of a forced narrative closure due to the rational application of science or military force. Children's films, even more so than mainstream cinema, have historically embraced the use of irrationality. In a subgenre that is saturated with fairy tale and fantasy films, the use of magic, the presence of supernatural creatures, and the humans with unexplainable abilities are all too pervasive under the assumption that children have active imaginations and do not need a semblance of reality to engage with narrative. Even the most banal films in the subgenre include irrational uses and appearances of magic. For example, Disney's *Cinderella* includes a fairy godmother who appears and disappears without explanation and has powers to change ordinary objects into beautiful creations, such as a pumpkin into a carriage. Furthermore, the film includes many mice that can speak; however, other animals such as dogs, cats, and horses cannot speak a word. The phrase "bippity, boppity, boo," represents a magical presence in the film that cannot

be rationally explained. Because children's films contain so many inherent elements of irrationality, children's animated horror films hold the potential to refuse rational closures, even more effectively than their mainstream counterparts do, since the acceptance and encouragement of irrationality is part of its generic tradition. While this generic characteristic is not automatically postmodern, the combination of horror and its defiance of rational closures do align with mainstream horror. In this way, this subgenre has the potential to strongly engage with postmodern horror in ways that open productive connections with mainstream horror and leads to a dismantling the dichotomy between mainstream horror and children's animated horror films.

### **HORROR REPUDIATES NARRATIVE CLOSURE**

Pinedo's fourth category concerns narrative closure, which she contends is purely a postmodern concern. She posits that, "violating narrative closure has become de rigueur for the postmodern genre" (99). She contends that postmodern horror films end one of two ways: monster triumphs or outcome is uncertain. While these two categories may apply to almost all slasher films, many children's films do not like to end on such negative or uncertain terms. I argue that repudiating narrative closure is not unique to the postmodern horror genre. While the two ways that Pinedo outlines may be different from previous subgenres, they are certainly not the only methods to refuse closure. Universal classic horror films may seem like they secure the narrative before the films' endings; however, this is not the case. Universal and other monster-making studios of the 1930s and 1940s are notorious for creating sequels and hybridization horror films. For *Frankenstein* alone Universal released *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), and *House of Frankenstein* (1944) within 10 years. While not all of these films are

sequels, they certainly prevent the “secure universe characterized by narrative closure” that Pinedo suggests. By repudiating narrative closure, classic horror films continued to be a financial asset to film studios.

The ending of *Frankenweenie* is by far the hardest part of the film to classify as postmodern because it participates in the paradigm of a Disney ending: boy saves dog, town accepts the zombie pet as normal, and the dynamic duo return to the joys of everyday life. There is almost an “And they lived happily ever after” feel to the end of the film. However, this film strongly rejects finality. In the opening scene, Victor shows his homemade movie featuring Sparky. At the end of his short film, a sign flashes that reads “The End . . . or is it?” While the ending of *Frankenweenie* does not include the phrase “or is it,” that axiom is certainly implied. On the Disney Blu-ray edition of the film, the company has already included a *Frankenweenie* short titled “Captain Sparky vs. the Flying Saucer.” The frame narrative of this short includes Victor and the reanimated Sparky introducing the film. This continuation of the narrative world implies that the *Frankenweenie* universe is far from closed. There is already an Internet buzz concerning a direct sequel and more shorts. While *Frankenweenie* has the stereotypical Disney ending, it still repudiates narrative closure, primarily because of the capital Disney still stands to make from Victor and his beloved pet.

*ParaNorman*, on the other hand, does not repudiate narrative closure, but in many ways it embraces a closed narrative. Unlike Disney, Laika Studios does not release short films to accompany its productions, nor does it create sequels, even to popular films. Thus, the ending of *ParaNorman* is the end of the narrative with a very unlikely chance that any production, small or large, will re-open the story. Therefore, *ParaNorman*’s cinematic ending is the only method to gage if the narrative embraces or resists closure. For Pinedo, resisting closure requires the

triumph of the monster or an ambiguous ending, which does not proclaim a clear winner or loser. According to those criteria, *ParaNorman* does not reject narrative closure, but rather embraces it. The film ends with Norman creating peace in the monster, Agatha, which leads to her freedom and release from the real world into the spirit world. Agatha's freedom can be read a triumph for Norman, who rids the town of her dangerous, childlike tantrums, but also as a triumph for herself when she finally achieves an eternal peace that pacifies centuries old need for vengeance. While both characters ultimately are satisfied, Norman's actions do rid the town of danger and Agatha's disappearance is conclusive; therefore, there is no chance that monster poses a threat that could continue beyond the ending of the film. The film also ends on certain terms, not ambiguously. Norman clearly rids the town of the monster, the town embraces Norman for his differences, and Norman is able to spend quality time with his family, both living and dead. There is no indication that another spirit is on the horizon or that the town will ultimately reject Norman and relegate him to the status of outsider.

These two films indicate that more than the cinematic content, affiliated studios play a large role in the ways that children's animated horror films can repudiate narrative closure, more so than their mainstream counterparts. For typical Disney films, the film must end with a "happily-ever-after," which makes impossible the opportunity to have a monstrous presence triumph; however, the studio can produce shorts that interact with existing films in ways that indicate a Disney narrative is never truly closed if there is an opportunity to make additional profit from the story. Smaller studios, such as Laika Studios, do not reopen the narrative through shorts or full-length feature sequels, but rather their model includes creating unique narratives with each release. Therefore, each individual film's ending indicates if the narrative is closed. Laika narratives have a permanent closing, whereas Disney's narrative closures rely heavily on

current and future profitability. Since *ParaNorman*'s ending is conclusive, one might argue it does not reach all the criteria to be considered a postmodern horror film; however, I contend that for children's animated horror films, narratives can be postmodern without a heavy reliance on repudiated narrative closures. The ability for a film to reject closure relies more heavily on studio affiliation than actual cinematic content. Mainstream horror is famous for its horror franchises with numerous sequels from a variety of studios. In order to create enduring franchises, these films must have an open-end in order keep audiences returning; however, children's films require that the narrative close, at least temporarily, in order to achieve a "happily-ever-after." After its closure, studios may choose to re-open the narrative for profit. Therefore, postmodern horror, in many instances, repudiates narrative closure; however, within the subgenre of children's animated horror film, the rejection of a closed narrative is not required in order for films to engage and exude postmodern horror characteristics.

### **HORROR AS A BOUNDED EXPERIENCE OF FEAR**

Horror as a bounded experience of fear applies to the genre as a whole. Pinedo discusses the bounded experience of fear in terms of temporal and spatial nature of film, as well as the setting of film viewing in a semi-public setting. She contends that horror film is a collective experience bound much like a rollercoaster ride. She argues that "Like the latter [rollercoaster ride] people in a confined space are kept off-balance through the use of suspense and precipitous surprises" (106). Pinedo continues to explain that this experience creates the combination of fear and pleasure, which she labels recreational terror. The importance of the bounded experience lies in its ability lessen the distress felt by audience members so that they choose to sit and endure the horror, as opposed to walking out (107). Furthermore, the bounded experience is a space that sanctions taboo feelings. Pinedo asserts that, "controlled loss substitutes for loss of control"

(108). Therefore, the bounded experience creates a space to feel repressed feelings such as terror and rage in a controlled environment.

Pinedo argues that a bounded experience of fear is constructed by the running length of the film, spatial allotment of the screen, and the finite nature of cinematic narrative. While Pinedo focuses on the fear that is bound in the experience of horror, the fact is that the viewing of any film is a bounded experience. Viewing audiences are familiar with running times as well as the physical size of screens, auditory equipment, and theater sizes. The only unique attribute of the bounded experience of horror lies in the role of communal reaction in expressing fear.

Tony Magistrale asserts that “part of the pleasure of going to a horror film is connection with an active, participatory audience . . . Somehow, terror becomes less terrible when it is shared with a large interactive theater audience” (xvii). Thus, the bounded experience creates a place for a collective group to express fear, which helps alleviate the amount of tension terror creates.

Furthermore, Pinedo maintains, “Horror expressly plays on the physical and emotional responses of the audience. It elicits screams, nervous gasps, and laughter. When an involuntary scream escapes our lips, it is reassuring to hear it echoed in the scream of others . . .” (109).

While horror films certainly provide a space for audience reaction and interaction, so do other genres such as the comedy genre; laughter creates more laughter, just as screams elicit more screams. While I do not agree with Pinedo that a bounded experience is a novel attribute of the horror genre, both *Frankenweenie* and *ParaNorman* undoubtedly have the features of a bounded experience, especially with regards to fear.

*Frankenweenie* runs approximately 87 minutes. It was in theaters for over a month, with an opening box office gross of over \$11 million (USD), and it was released to Disney DVD and Blu-ray in January 2013 (Box Office Mojo). Cinema attendees viewed the film in a bounded

theater, and now families can sit in their homes and can enjoy the bounded experience again. These attributes create the finite space in order to bind the narrative experience. It creates a space for children (and adults to a lesser extent) to express feelings of apprehension and fear, rather it be because of a reanimated pet corpses or the daily horror endemic to everyday life. Pinedo posits “horror exposes the terror *implicit* in everyday life: the pain of loss, the enigma of death, the unpredictability of events, and the inadequacy of intentions” (106). In many ways, the terror of everyday life is denaturalized in the monster and allows audience members to experience the terror they often repress. Therefore, the death and reanimation of Sparky creates the bounded experience of fear that could allow children to feel and express the repressed feelings of loss, death, and the unpredictability of their lived experiences.

In addition to the spatial and temporal bounded experience, *Frankenweenie* once again transgresses boundaries and the narrative can exist outside of the bounded experiences of the cinematic narrative, which Pinedo does not consider. This transgression is enabled by its children's film status and affiliations with Disney. Disney is a master at marketing and merchandising. Even before *Frankenweenie's* theatrical release, Disney started an art tour “*Frankenweenie: The Art of Exhibition*,” which ran from July 2012-November 2012 (Parry). It allowed fans to engage with the show's characters in puppet form. There was even an interactive feature that allowed fans to see how the puppets move in a stop-motion animation film. This exhibit is available for viewing on the Disney DVD/Blu-Ray combo pack. Additionally, Disney has created an entire *Frankenweenie* product line that includes plush figures of many of the characters, scenes, posters, clothing, and even an iOS app that allows the user to “Frankenweenie-ify” his or her own pet. While *Frankenweenie* can and does provide an opportunity for bounded experiences both in the cinema and at home, its heavy marketing and

product line transgresses the bounded experience and allows audiences, especially children, to engage with characters and ideas outside of the bounded narrative space; in fact, it allows children to incorporate the narrative even more into their everyday lives. This takes the narrative from a bounded experience of fear to an unbounded experience of detached cinematic characters and potential new narratives.

*ParaNorman*, like all films, also create a bounded experience due to its cinematic regularities. This film has a running time of 92 minutes long. It was released in U.S. theaters on August 17, 2012 with an opening weekend gross of \$14 million. It stayed in theaters for over three months, and it made its DVD and Blu-ray debut on November 27, 2012 (Box Office Mojo). The film's running time and theatrical run creates a bounded experience for viewers to watch the film in community and play off of one another's reactions. Furthermore, the DVD and Blu-ray versions allow for viewers to have bounded experiences in their homes with (or without) their families. Additionally, the film allows children to experience the terror of bullying and its negative physical and emotional affects by creating two characters, Norman and Agatha, who experience loss, pain, and suffering because of their differences. The topic of bullying is a contemporary social issue, and one with which students are engaged on a regular basis. The fear of punishment due to difference can be experienced in the bound experience of fear in the cinematic showing of *ParaNorman*. Not only can children process the fear of a witch and zombies, but also terrors that they may face in everyday life. Instead of processing these emotions in a negative and debilitating way, the communal bound experience provides for the mixture of fear and terror, creating a recreational terror that allows both pleasure and fear to co-exist in a manageable way.



Unlike Disney, however, Laika Studios is not a marketing or merchandising powerhouse; therefore, *ParaNorman* does not challenge the boundaries of the bounded experience in the manner that *Frankenweenie* does. While Disney has marketed and licensed the patchwork dog, ParaNorman merchandise is difficult to find. The only main creator and distributor of toys for the film is a small, California-based toy company, Huckleberry Toys, which created a line of 4' action figures based on characters from the film including Norman and the zombies. Laika Studios does not focus on the merchandising opportunities for any of its films, which limits the way it transgresses boundaries of the bounded experience. In fact, Laika Studios seem to firmly close the narrative and maintain the bounded experience over that of an unbounded and unlimited narrative opportunity.

## **CONCLUSION**

The integration of postmodern characteristics within children's literature and media has provided children's narratives with more legitimacy, bringing them closer to their mainstream counterparts. Cogan Thacker and Webb posit, "Fluidity and indeterminacy of meaning, lack of closure and play with language all contribute to children's literature as a revolutionary force" (149). All of the aforementioned characteristics are a result of postmodernism's influence on culture in general. While Thacker and Webb only survey children's literature, their statement holds true for children's films. As children's cinema has embraced and showcases characteristics of postmodernism, it becomes more legitimized as a subgenre, as well as a major contender with mainstream Hollywood film.

Children's animated horror film's prominent use of both pastiche and generic hybridity has created more complex films that appeal to both children and adult audiences. Not only do these films span audience members of various ages, but they also cross generic boundaries,

which allows the films to participate within other generic characteristics that enhance their overall dialogue with mainstream cinema. More significantly, children's animated horror film's also actively engage with postmodern horror traits, specifically, which draws this once isolated subgenre into a clear and strong dialog with the larger horror genre. Since mainstream horror and children's animated horror films share many of the characteristics of postmodern horror, both genres can be classified as horror. Therefore, the dichotomy and hierarchy between children's entertainment and mainstream cinema can begin being dismantled and children's media, in general, and children's animated horror films, specifically, can begin getting the critical and academic attention that the subgenre warrants.

## **CHAPTER 4: BOYS AND GHOULS: GENDER ROLE DIFFERENCES IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILMS**

This project has largely used specific films to align the often criticized and illegitimized subgenre of children's animated horror film with its mainstream horror counterpart. While this chapter continues to synthesize these two genres, I will not use a subset of particular films, but rather use all nine films within this subgenre to explore how children's animated horror film addresses issues of gender within the cinematic traditions of both mainstream horror and children's animated films. In popular discussions of horror films, fans and scholars alike have labeled the genre as "masculine." This categorization of horror stems from the prevalent assumption that horror films appeal primarily to a male audience, and the genre emphasizes the effect of powerful male monsters on their passive female victims.

Feminist scholarship has led to a transformation of reading the genre not only as a piece of popular culture, but also a genre that lends itself to scholarly discussions of gender portrayals and roles. Later in this chapter, I will draw on the works of Barbara Creed, Linda Williams, and Carol J. Clover to explore the shifting perceptions of gender and horror during the history of the genre. Labeling this genre as masculine posits a monolithic approach to horror; however, feminist scholars have actively worked against the bifurcated presentation of powerful males and passive females in order to create a reading of the genre that allies both the male and female figures in interesting and complex paradigms of power. At first, female characters were viewed and depicted solely as passive victims; however, Creed's concept of the monstrous feminine and Clover's categorization of horror's best-known character type, "the Final Girl," attributes power to female monsters and female victims, creating a more complex genre open to more liberating readings in terms of gender.

While feminist theory is a vital tool in exploring gender in horror, children's animated horror requires examination in terms of gender's relationship to horror *and* gender's relationship to children's film. Because the subgenre subsumes characteristics of both popular genres, reading it only through the lens of gender and horror does not fully account for the gender roles within children's animated horror film. For example, concepts such as male spectatorship and female victimization play a far lesser role in children's animated horror because of the age of the intended audience, as well as the perceived age of the on-screen characters. As stated in chapter one, the preservation of the image of childhood innocence is at the center of children's films, and thus affects the type of victimization that can occur on screen. Therefore, in addition to scholars like Creed, Williams, and Clover, I will draw on the studies of Keisha Hoerrner and Dawn England, et. al to examine how children's animated films, as a whole, incorporate, reinforce, and at times challenge gender stereotypes and roles. Both of these studies focus on Disney films, with a strong emphasis on princess films; however, Disney princess films arguably account for a large portion of children's animated films and influence other films to include similar gender depictions and compulsory heterosexual coupling in order to achieve happily-ever-after. Therefore, these studies shed light on films that are non-Disney as well as non-princess.

Feminist scholarship in horror has rewritten the role of the passive female victim and attributed power to her; however, instead of following liberating female roles in horror, children's animated horror films heavily draw on the children's animated film characteristics, including essentialist versions of masculinity and femininity. This subgenre, therefore, creates dominance and activity for its male characters, as well as victimization and passivity for its female characters. A majority of the subgenre's films falls into children's animated films stereotypical gender roles; however, there are films and roles within this subgenre that challenge

the norm and create new, liberating possibilities for this subgenre and its legitimization within the mainstream horror genre. When examining gender within this subgenre, I will focus on gender depiction within the following four character types: the protagonist, the monster, the victim, and the sidekick. By surveying all nine films, clear patterns emerge that indicate the protagonists and monsters in the subgenre are primarily male. Victims (on the rare occasion victimization occurs to children) have a mix of genders; however, the children victims who are most clearly terrorized are female. The role of sidekick is fulfilled using a mix of both genders, but sidekicks and protagonists more often than not end up in heterosexual coupling, which lends a clean closure to the film. Exploring gender within the categorization of these four horror character types allows the space to see how children's animated horror films exhibit traits of horror, as well as stereotypes endemic in children's media. The combination of horror and children's film create a subgenre that at times reinforce normative gender roles, but have the potential to challenge and create liberating moments within both genres.

## **FEMINIST THEORY AND THE CINEMATIC HORROR GENRE**

Feminist theory has been one force that has helped legitimize the academic study of mainstream horror film. Tony Magistrale claims that horror was, "too often held as a suspect art form by 'serious' scholars of film and literature, [and] the work of these women critics insists that horror art cannot be so easily dismissed, even if the interpretative theories applied to them are sometimes more sophisticated and engaging than the primary film texts themselves" (11). The academy dismissed cinematic horror often because of its formulaic composition, adherence to strict generic conventions, and inclusion of grotesque violence and somatic violations that made critics categorize horror as simple genre fiction. While victimization in horror existed since before "talkies," the increasing institutionalization of feminism in the 1970s combined with

the emergence of the “slasher” subgenre, signaled by the release of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* in 1978, created a space to start asking legitimate scholarly questions concerning this category of genre fiction.

Prior to the 1980s, feminist scholars focused on horror films and their constructions of an active male monster and a passive female victim; however, Susan Lurie’s 1981 article “The Construction of the 'Castrated Woman' in Psychoanalysis and Cinema” discusses woman as a site of fear for men, especially as a castrating other. Lurie’s argument ultimately reverts to the analytical pattern of active male monster and passive female victim; however, her study was the first attempt to attribute monstrous power to female characters in horror film and started conversations that would later be developed in the works of Linda Williams, Barbara Creed, and Carol J. Clover.

Linda Williams uses Lurie’s reconceptualization of power structures in horror to further explore gender relations in the genre. In the 1984 essay, “When the Woman Looks,” Williams explores the connection between the male monster and female victim by looking at what she calls “power-in-difference.” Instead of focusing on the inversion of the gender roles presented in some horror films, Williams explores cross-gendered identification. She argues that the male monster and the female victim have more in common than previously assumed because the patriarchal view of their bodies label both characters as abject and biologically and sexually threatening. Williams claims, “there is a sense in which the woman’s look at the monster . . . is also a recognition of their similar status as potent threats to vulnerable male power” (65). Williams contends that because the monster is not a normal male, he is more like a woman due to his comparative sexual difference from other males. Furthermore, she posits that a female victim can be viewed both victim and monster, and thus passive and powerful, due to her

identification with the monster. While the female character identifies with the male monster, she is not in an alliance with the monster. In fact, slasher films often pit the monster against an eventual lone female victim, and the genre demands that one of them must be, at least seemingly, be destroyed by the end of the film. Williams' focus on the power of female gaze creates power for both the female "victim," as well as the female viewing audience by assigning power and recognition of the female gaze, instead of following Mulvey's famous argument detailing male spectatorship and the cinematic "male gaze."

Drawing on the work Williams, Barbara Creed does not question that the cross-identification between victim and monster occurs, but rather explores the reasons that the female body is regarded as monstrous to the extent that the female victims' physical act of looking at the monster brings about recognition of self as a threat. In her influential study, *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993), Creed questions "what exactly is it about the woman herself, as being quite separate from the male monster, that produces definitions of female monstrosity? (6). After detailing the inherent construction of female victimization due to Freud's assertion that, "woman terrifies because she is castrated" Creed argues that these definitions of female victimization begin already rooted in patriarchal definitions that enforce an essentialist view of gender (7). Upon looking at the horror genre as a whole, especially woman as mother, monster, vampire, and witch, Creed concludes that horror films have numerous examples of women as active monsters, not just passive victims. She ultimately concludes the monstrous feminine has more to do with "male fear than female desire or subjectivity," and thus does not necessarily lead to a liberated feminist reading; however, she acknowledges the ways in which the monstrous feminine challenges the concepts of both male and female spectatorship (7).

Both the work of Williams and the early work of Creed create the space to ask questions about identification and gender in horror, which led to Carol J. Clover's seminal text *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992). Clover extends Williams argument by looking at fluid identification, instead of cross identification. She posits that identification is far more complex, especially with the young male audience known to frequent horror films. She identifies that the audience might first identify with the killer, but later reverse allegiances. Her most popular and enduring concept is that of the "Final Girl". In the examination of 1970s slasher films, Clover identifies a lone female figure that is not fully feminine and eventually defeats the monster that is not fully masculine, which echoes Williams' earlier work. Clover argues that the gender of the Final Girl, "is comprised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance, her apartness from the other girls . . . her exercise of the 'active investigative gaze' normally reserved for males and punished in females when they assume it themselves" (9). Much like Williams and Creed, Clover attempts to overcome two decades worth of passive victim/male monster bifurcation, but her argument relies on labeling the Final Girl as essentially a co-opted male hero.

Isabel Cristina Pinedo begins her argument in *Recreational Terror* (1997) with Clover's concept of the Final Girl; unlike Clover, Pinedo argues that the Final Girl does not have to be labeled male or exhibit an overwhelming number of masculine traits in order to retain the power associated with masculinity in horror. She asserts that Clover's Final Girl is essentially a "powerful female underneath it all a male in drag" (81). Pinedo suggests that women in the audience do not have to view the Final Girl as a male in drag, but that a female protagonist can be fully powerful and exhibit primarily female characteristics; the power can be located in the female and female body without masking the character with traditionally masculine traits. She



claims that this depiction is more complex, powerful and “subverts [the] binary notion of gender that buttresses male dominance” (83).

All four feminist scholars have actively worked towards moving away from the bifurcation between male monster and female victim. This conceptual shift has started to free the horror genre from accusations of solely employing male sadism and female victimization. In many instances, the scholarship produced by these four women has created a horror genre that is far more progressive in terms of gender portrayal. Not only have these theorists looked to past cinematic depictions of monsters and victims to examine gender, but their theories specifically on the power-in-difference, the monstrous feminine, and the Final Girl, have especially shaped the ways that film writers and directors depict gender on screen in mainstream horror. For example, *Cabin in the Woods* specifically plays with the concept of a Final Girl who is obviously gazed upon by male love interests, as well as audience members inside and outside of the film; however, the Final Girl actively looks back at her male spectators and causes destruction for all, even herself. These complex depictions of gender allow for the entire reconceptualization of gender within this genre and include more freeing female characters, as clear monster figures, victims, and a complex combination of both.

## **FEMINIST THEORY AND CHILDREN’S FILMS**

Feminist studies have certainly traced and created a change in gender depiction in horror films from female as passive victim to female as potentially active and powerful; however, before examining these roles in children’s animated horror film, there is a need to explore gender within children’s films in order to understand the complex depiction of gender when combining the two larger genres. Most gender studies in children’s films have explored Disney films primarily due to the sheer output from this media giant. Keisha Hoerrner’s 1996 study “Gender

Roles in Disney Films: Analyzing Behaviors from Snow White to Simba,” examines gender in terms of prosocial and antisocial behaviors of characters, number of actions per film and characteristics of male and female villains versus protagonists. While Hoerrner’s study does not include children’s animated horror films, it does show a trend in active/passive behavior and its correlation to gender and perceived levels of good and evil.

Hoerrner’s study divides characters’ behaviors into two categories: prosocial and antisocial. Prosocial behaviors are marked by altruism, explaining feelings, sympathy, control of aggression, and resistance to temptation, while antisocial behavior is characterized by physical aggression, verbal aggression, deceit, and theft (216). In her study of eleven Disney films, she discovers that of all the displayed antisocial behaviors, male characters execute 84% and female characters perform a mere 16%. Because antisocial behaviors are linked to physical actions, Hoerrner’s study suggests that male characters are more active in Disney animated films. Furthermore, male characters also act out more prosocial behaviors at 68%, compared to female characters at 32%. At first, this data suggests that men can participate in coded female traits and thus fluid cross identification is present. However, I argue that this discrepancy is due to the fact that men perform almost four times more actions per film than females. Of all the coded actions in the eleven films, male characters have 570 actions, compared to the 157 actions performed by females (220). Even in films where the main protagonists are female, the male characters are still afforded more actions.

In Disney films, heroes are wholly good, and villains are purely evil. This dichotomy is evidenced in the number of prosocial behaviors exhibited by villains: “Notably, however, Disney villains exhibit almost no prosocial behaviors (2%), leaving those to the protagonists (98%) . . . the behaviors of Disney’s animated villains leave no doubt that they are the ‘bad people’” (222).

However, even amongst villains, male villains perform more antisocial behaviors than their female counterparts do; female villains have 30 coded antisocial behaviors, while male villains exhibit 135 (223). Even though there are female villains who engage in antisocial behaviors, male villains are still more active, but that does not mean they are more threatening.

More recently, in 2011 Dawn England, et al., examine gender in Disney Princess films. They trace the evolution of gender portrayal in Disney films by examining the princess lines in terms of classic princess narratives, revival princess narratives, and renaissance narratives. Examining nine films, England, et al., conclude that some masculine characteristics include the need to explore, curiosity, independence, lack of emotional response, bravery and leadership, while feminine characteristics consist of physical attractiveness, weakness, submission, affection, fear, shame, and victimization (559). Even later Disney renaissance films such as *Tangled* (2010) and the blockbuster *Frozen* (2013) ultimately characterize princesses as physically attractive, fearful, and in need of help, despite some of the other progressive messages in the film. England, et. al conclude that gender portrayal in Disney Princess narratives have certainly changed over time; however, this progression is not entirely linear, nor does it mean that gender portrayal has reached an egalitarian status. England goes so far as to state that, “Although both the male and female roles have changed over time in the Disney Princess line, the male characters exhibit more androgyny throughout and less change in their gender role portrayals” (555). The fact that the neither the male or female characters have transcended their essentialist depictions demonstrates the ways in which children’s film attempt to be progressive, but often times ultimately rely on stereotypical gender depictions in order to achieve the happily-ever-after resolution. This dependence creates films that recycle, rather than challenge, essentialist gender depictions.

With Hoerrner's and England's, et al., coding studies in mind, there are clear gender roles in children's animated horror film for protagonists; however, monsters and victims have a mix of genders, while maintaining that most monsters are still male and most child victims, when present, are female. Sidekicks are often an even mix of gender and eventually one sidekick becomes a love interest of the protagonist, which leads to heterosexual coupling and a "happily-ever-after" resolution. By examining all nine children's animated horror films individually, I argue that children's animated horror films use stereotypical depictions of gender as perpetrated by the genre of children's film, instead of the more liberating gender possibilities theorized in contemporary horror film scholarship. By exploring four character types, protagonist, monster, victim, and sidekick, children's animated horror films can be seen as participating in essentialist gender depictions found in many children's animated films, but the subgenre has moments that challenge and utilize mainstream horror's liberating concepts of the monstrous-feminine and the Final Girl to create complex depictions of gender that help place this subgenre within a larger critical dialogue with mainstream horror.

## **HORROR CHARACTER CATEGORIES**

Before examining individual films and their overall adherence or challenges to essentialist gender portrayal, I will briefly outline the four main horror character categories I will use to explore each film. One character all narratives have in common is a protagonist. In children's animated horror, this protagonist is generally a lone character supported by a cast of sidekicks. In mainstream horror, protagonists consist of a mix of genders; however, protagonists in children's animated horror films are primarily male, with the sole exception of Henry Selick's 2009 *Coraline*. The gender composition seems to reflect the active roles of males in many children's animated films. The protagonists in horror are certainly the ones responsible for

destroying any potential threats and returning their world to normalcy; however, not all male protagonists exhibit drastically masculine characteristics. For some of these characters, the films set them as outsiders in their own societies, which greatly affects their gender adherence. While these films still privilege the male characters as the active protagonists, the addition of their outsider status allows for more deviation from essentialist gender roles, especially concerning active and passive characteristics.

The next character type, monsters, is frequently used by scholars like Carroll to define the genre of horror. The monster in children's animated horror film is a slightly more ambiguous category because some films do not have monsters, per se. Comedic horror films often depict humans as the monsters. For the purpose of my study, I will not dedicate time exploring the role of monsters in films that do not actually have monsters that pose a threat. Additionally, some films show societal rules and standards as monstrous, instead of having a solitary figure stand as the abject. In examining films with clearly defined monster characters, there is a mixture of gender; however, the most threatening monsters are female. In the films with male monsters, these creatures often reflect classic monsters such as the Bogey Man (Oogie Boogie from *Nightmare Before Christmas*) or Universal monsters by direct or indirect reference (from *Frankenweenie* and *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit*). Conversely, films with female monsters exhibit traits outlined by Creed as monstrous-feminine, especially because the focus of the danger of the female body, its excretions, and its status as intolerable or abject. Within children's animated horror films, the most threatening monsters in this subgenre are those coded as the monstrous-feminine, not simply monstrous. The power assigned to some female characters, especially in monster form, superficially serves to shift the balance of power from male-centric to include females; however, since the most powerful females are ultimately

destroyed, the challenges posed to the passive/active dichotomy are not fully followed through or resonate within this subgenre.

The presence of threatening monsters creates the category of victims. As previously mentioned, victimization in children's animated horror film is exceptionally complex because it is hard to depict the victimization of children (even animated children) without challenging the sustaining cultural ideology of the innocence of childhood. Interestingly enough, many of the "victims" in children's film are most notably chosen by age, not gender. Adults, far more often than children, are victims. For example, major victims in the subgenre victimized by actual threatening monsters include "Sandy Claws" from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and Bones and two police officers in *Monster House*. Even Emily and Victoria from the *Corpse Bride* are portrayed as victims of the societal gender inequality in Victorian England, even though there is no clear threatening monster. Of the four children victims in the subgenre, three victims happen to be female: Coraline (*Coraline*), Agatha (*ParaNorman*) and to a lesser extent Elsa (*Frankenweenie*). The only male "victim" is Norman (*ParaNorman*) and is not so much a victim of monsters or monstrous deeds, but rather societal expectations. Children's animated horror films rewrite the role of victims to focus on adult victimization in order to avoid criticism for violating childhood innocence. In the case of our childhood female victims, each girl responds to her victimization differently. Elsa, for the most part, is inactive and waits to be saved by townspeople, Victor, or Sparky. Agatha channels her victimization as the source of her need for revenge, thus creating Agatha as the dual victim and monster of *ParaNorman*. Coraline, on the other hand, does not become monstrous nor does she passively wait to be rescued. She is an active victim who works to overcome the monster and escape the threat posed by the film. Exploring the connection between victimization, adulthood, and gender helps illuminate the

course that children's animated horror films continue to use in order to overcome children's films gender essentialism, as well as offer a spectrum of actions comparable to mainstream horror.

The final category of characters in horror films is sidekicks. Every protagonist in children's animated horror films must have at least one sidekick. These assistants are generally the same age as the protagonist; however, the genders of the sidekicks are fairly well distributed. In fact, considering all nine films and assuming gender of non-human sidekicks, it is almost a fifty-fifty distribution. This even division is not uncommon given that most slasher films have a gang of teenagers of mixed gender. In most children's animated horror film, at least one sidekick of the opposite gender is a love interest and in most cases a kiss or physical touch is experienced at the end of the film. The notable exception to this claim is Norman and Neil from *ParaNorman*. Norman only has Neil as non-family sidekick and there is no apparent romantic relationship between the two characters. For most of the subgenre, the sustained romantic sidekick paired with a physical act at the end of the film adheres to children's film convention of heterosexual coupling as the most dominant form of happily-ever-after, which serves to reinforce the status quo of traditional expectations. Throughout the time allotment of mainstream slasher and torture porn films, the monster destroys most sidekicks, leaving either a lone protagonist or Clover's Final Girl at the film's closing. Since children's animated horror films do not create many children victims, all the sidekicks survive until the end and enable this type of heterosexual coupling that is normally punished by mainstream horror.

By using these four categories of characters to analyze each of the nine films that currently comprise this subgenre, children's animated horror film clearly exemplifies some academic theories of gender in horror films, especially the monstrous-feminine; however, the

subgenre most dominantly displays stereotypical gender endemic to the genre of children's film instead of more recent mainstream horror. While theories in gender and the horror genre have freed the female role from victimization and passivity, children's horror film often retains the passivity through placing female characters in the role of sidekicks and victims, instead of protagonists, and by creating monsters who embody the monstrous-feminine, and thus must be destroyed by the film's end.

### ***THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS (1993)***

Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) is one of the first children's animated horror films in the subgenre. This narrative follows the protagonist's, Jack Skellington's, ennui with Halloween and quest to become the new "Sandy Claws" of Christmastown. Although the film certainly has a mix of genders, as well as some characters with unknown gender, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* undoubtedly details one male's journey, not really the townspeople's actions or even the other main character, Sally, who journeys to escape the mad scientist who created her. The film grants Jack a majority of screen time, as well as overall actions. From the beginning, we know that Jack's actions are what secure a successful Halloween every year and earns him the title, "The Pumpkin King." Additionally, Jack leaves Halloweentown twice, an unheard action for all townspeople. This escape allows Jack to establish new ambitions, such as taking over Christmastown, and spend his remaining time in Halloweentown using his scheming to create faux-Christmas decorations and toys for his December journey. The ultimate action of the film centers on Jack's and his dog's, Zero's, journey to fulfill the role of "Sandy Claws" and deliver presents to the good boys and girls of Christmastown. While other characters in the film help Jack prepare, they are assistants, not creators. They follow the plans of Jack and only act on his command or detailed plans. Jack is



the clear protagonist of the narrative, and his clear gendering as male opens up the space for him to assume the most active role in the film.

Monsters within this narrative fall into two categories: unintentional and intentional. Halloweentown certainly has no shortage of unsavory characters. For example, Dr. Finkelstein is not only a mad scientist, but also holds one of his pieced-together creations, Sally, hostage as a maid and cook. Lock, Stock, and Barrel are a trio who willingly agree to “kidnap the Sandy Claws/Lock him up real tight/ Throw away the key and then/Turn off all the lights.” Despite the many minions running loose in this fictional town, the narrative centers on two “monsters:” Jack Skellington, the unintentional monster in Christmastown, and Oogie Boogie, the actual monster to both fictional worlds. Both of these monsters pose threats, but only one, Oogie Boogie, intends to cause chaos at the expense of a victim.

Jack Skellington is monstrous insofar as he creates terror in Christmastown. Though he believes he is truly excelling at being “Santy Claws,” his off-kilter and “Halloween” approach causes disappointment and terror amongst children and adults alike. Some of his non-traditional gifts include a shrunken-head-jack-in-the-box, a snake reminiscent of *Beetlejuice*, and a number of dismembered dolls. Jack’s monstrosity stems from a celebratory misunderstanding. Despite the fact he is “The Pumpkin King,” he does not understand Christmas, even though he spent many hours studying the holiday and traditions. Like all monsters, Christmastown attempts to destroy Jack and return the fictional world back to normalcy, even in the absence of Santa. Christmastown calls in their own version of armed forces, and ultimately shoots Jack, Zero, and their sleigh of Christmas toys out of the air. Jack fulfills all of the requirements for being a monster; however, since he also serves as the protagonist, we do not assign ill intent to him. In the song “Poor Jack,” Jack expresses that, “I never intended all this madness, never/And nobody

really understood, how could they?/ That all I ever wanted was to bring them something great/ Why does nothing ever turn out like it should?" The lyrics convey why Jack, though unintentionally monstrous in *Christmastown*, does not function as the actual monster of the film. The true monster must intentionally enact a threat against one or more characters in the film, like the film's intentional monster: Oogie Boogie.

In a world full of monsters that attempt to create a horrifying experience once a year, Oogie Boogie looms as the ultimate monster of the film. Every other creature enjoys terror as a form of celebration; however, Oogie Boogie's intentions seem wrought in evil desire. The video game, *The Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge*, reveals Oogie Boogie's backstory. There used to be an eighth holiday, Bug Day, that was quickly forgotten. Oogie Boogie stumbles upon Halloweentown and decides he can take it over and create another bug holiday. After facing defeat at the hands of Jack, Oogie Boogie is forced apart from mainstream Halloweentown and resides in his torture chamber/lair. He is literally the abject figure of the fictional world. Whether in backstory of the game or the plot of the film, Oogie Boogie is an unredeemable character that attempts to destroy not only "Sandy Claws," but also other citizens of Halloweentown. His lair includes many red skeletons, which are the remains of previous victims, and torture devices that resemble a Las Vegas casino gone wrong. This monster is easily defeated after being exposed as nothing but a burlap sack full of bugs and essentially squashed to death, though he does make later appearances in the video game franchise. The presence of Oogie Boogie uncovers an interesting connection between protagonist and monster. Jack Skellington could not be the main monster of the film because of his position as the protagonist. Oogie Boogie does not make an appearance in Burton's original poem, but is later added to flesh

out the story and history of Halloweentown. His addition helps delineate the line between good and evil and allows Jack to remain wholly good, despite his questionable actions.

The victims present in Halloweentown are few, especially if considering only characters that are victimized by the intentional monster. There are other victims in the film, such as Sally, who fall prey to societal gender conventions and forced confinement/inactivity. Additionally, all of the residents of Christmastown are victims of Jack Skellington's ill-executed Christmas adventure; however, the main victim of the film is the figure of "Santy Claws" himself. Like many other victims in this subgenre, he is an adult, not a child, and this status allows more harm to befall him. "Santy Claws" is, of course, male like the figures of the protagonist and monster, and unlike many female victims in animated media, he attempts to fight against the monster in order to secure his freedom. After he is kidnapped, "Santy Claws" attempts to be rational with Oogie Boogie, but later resorts to physical movement to free himself from the roulette wheel of death. Ultimately, he cannot free himself. In an attempt to save him, Sally lowers herself, or at least a seductive, dismembered part of herself, into the lair to distract Oogie Boogie and save "Santy Claws"; however, Oogie Boogie discovers the plan and ultimately captures Sally. Finally, Jack enters the scene, saves both characters, with a bit of help from "Santy Claws," and the film has a happy resolution; every character is back in the fictional world that they came from, at least until the video game franchise brings Oogie Boogie back to threaten the entire holiday world. "Santy Claws'" gender plays a pivotal role in the type of actions he can make once he is held captive. He uses the masculine traits of logic and physical strength to attempt to escape his captor, versus many other children's animated victims who wait passively to be rescued in fear, primarily because they are female. Though he does need Jack's help to achieve a return to normalcy, the narrative grants him agency to help with his own escape.

While the protagonist, monster, and main victim are all male, the film does present a host of sidekicks with a mix of genders, some even unidentifiable, who enable the protagonist's actions throughout the film. Because there is such a focus on Jack throughout the film, his sidekicks include almost every inhabitant of Halloweentown, with the exception of the abject figure of Oogie Boogie. Lock, Stock, and Barrel, a trio consisting of two males and a female, serve Jack by kidnapping "Santy Claws," while many generic figures such as witches, mad scientists, and a two-faced mayor help research the ideas behind Christmas and develop toys for the children of Christmastown, as well as "reindeer" and a sleigh to deliver said gifts. The diversity of sidekicks within the film are indicative of the mixture of genders present within mainstream horror and the subgenre of children's animated horror films; however, the focus on the heterosexual coupling of Jack and his main sidekick and love interest, Sally, strongly adheres to the conventions of children's animated film. Since many mainstream horror sidekicks are eliminated during the course of the film, the compulsory heterosexual coupling with a sidekick is not a necessary trait; however, because of the lack of victimization in the film, there is a push for heterosexual coupling between Jack and Sally at the end of the film to achieve the feeling of happily-ever-after endemic to children's cinema. The penultimate song of the film "Finale/Reprise" concludes with Jack and Sally singing the following lyrics: "My dearest friend [Sally], if you don't mind/I'd like to join you by your side/Where we can gaze into the stars/And sit together, now and forever/For it is plain as anyone can see/We're simply meant to be." Instead of ending with an open narrative for future sequels or the preparation for the next fright night, the film closes with kiss and an assurance that Jack, and consequently Sally, will live happily-ever-after in their rightful world of Halloweentown.

Within *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, gender is far from revolutionary. At times, Sally does show some active characteristics and bravery, which fall outside of the essentialist gender view of female passivity. For example, on several occasions she uses her domestic duty as cook in order to poison the mad scientist who entraps her. Additionally, she uses traditionally feminine skills of sewing (and seam ripping) to dismember herself to escape the tower and help Jack with his Christmas plans. While Sally continues to use skills associated with traditional femininity in order to subvert expectations, she ultimately waits to be saved and reunited with her “true love.” The film centers on the traditional masculine characteristics of Jack, as an active, intelligent, and physically strong male. He is not in an outsider position, but rather he is the “king” of an entire town and admired by all. His actions lead to the victimization of “Santy Claws,” a male victim who is also granted agency to help with his own escape from the male monster of Oogie Boogie who takes actions to inflict pain on his victims. Most of the actions of the film are assumed and performed by male characters, despite the presence of female sidekicks. This film could have abolished the passive female/active male dichotomy seen in early horror and almost all children’s cinema by emphasizing Sally’s actions, rather than limiting and confining them within heteronormative paradigms. This decision results in a film that highlights actions of males and reinscribes female action into passivity by forcing a heterosexual relationship with a passive/active bifurcation. Instead of assuming traits of mainstream horror in an effort to liberate the characters from essential gender depiction, the film heavily relies on children’s animated film, especially Disney. Danny Elfman’s score notably follows the pattern of other Disney film’s, especially princess narratives. The soundtrack tells a majority of the story, which helps lessen the horrific moments and at times presents moments of comedic space. The music works to establish the plight of the hero and his ultimate heterosexual coupling with a

female sidekick. The reliance on Disney should come as no surprise since Burton created the poem while working for Disney in 1982, the company released the title under their *Touchstone Pictures* banner in 1993 and continues to use the characters in various Disney video game franchises.

### ***WALLACE AND GROMIT: CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT (2005)***

Many children's animated films are based on Universal monsters or children's literature known to elicit fear from children; however, Aardman Animations and DreamWorks Pictures' *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* comes from the popular British short film series by Nick Park. The protagonist of the film is undoubtedly Wallace, not Lady Tottington or even Gromit. Wallace is by far the most active character in the film. He invents all the devices used to humanly capture and store the rabbits, as well as the Mind-Manipulation-O-Matic that is intended to brainwash the rabbit population. Additionally, he speaks his own struggles, thoughts, and opinions, which is a right afforded to no other character. The audience is privileged to Wallace's thoughts, or at least the one's he is aware of himself, and to Wallace's actions. Because Gromit is a silent companion, we do not hear his thoughts, and many of his actions are based on the commands of Wallace or designed to save Wallace from a dangerous situation. Lady Tottington, another human character with screen time, is more of a damsel-in-distress than a protagonist. She calls upon the knowledge and experience of Anti-Pesto Pest Control in order to secure a successful vegetable competition. From the beginning, she needs Wallace to help save her event, and this need for "saving" persists throughout the duration of the film. Lastly, the only other human character is the antagonist, Victor, who is immediately established as a villain because he shows disdain towards the protagonist, Wallace. Wallace, as the protagonist, assumes all the characteristics of traditional masculinity in children's animated films, in general. He is

active, associated with inventiveness, problem-solves, and runs his own business. This strong connection between the film and children's animated film, instead of mainstream horror, may stem from the fact that the film is not truly horrifying, but rather recycles both the "were" myth, generally associated with were-wolfs, and the original British *Wallace and Gromit* short film series. The film roots itself in British humor, puns, and riffs from classic "were" lore, not mainstream horror, especially contemporary horror films. Wallace's solid adherence to masculine characteristics of animated films, especially of activity and a savior role, leave little room or action for this film and its secondary characters to challenge gender in any of the remaining character categories.

The terrorizing monster of the film, the Were-Rabbit, is not so terrifying or even particularly monstrous. The primary reason behind the tame monster classification stems from the lack of human victims. Within the film, the only things that suffer at the hands of the Were-Rabbit are large, bountiful vegetable crops. Since there is no strong vegetable rights movement in the U.S. or Britain, unlike human or animal rights movements, the victims in the film are never perceived as victims, but rather vegetables consumed much like our own consumption. Therefore, since no victims were harmed in the duration of the film, the monster itself is non-threatening. The secondary reason the monster appears non-threatening includes the monster's true identity as Wallace. This film is one of the only examples of the protagonist and the monster being the same character. Some films, like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, have the protagonist unintentionally become a monster; however, those films work hard at presenting an intentional monster that frees the protagonist from any guilt or threat of monstrosity. While *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* has a villain, Victor, his actions are not so much monstrous as they are cruel. His biggest evil action, shooting the Were-Rabbit, is actually

sanctioned by Lady Tottington and the residents participating in the contest. His attempt to kill the Were-Rabbit appears more menacing to the audience than simple animal cruelty, especially since the audience knows that Wallace and the Were-Rabbit are one in the same. At the end of the film, the Were-Rabbit turns back into a nude Wallace, and whatever threat was posed to the vegetables of Tottington Hall disappears. Thus, Wallace as the Were-Rabbit creates a male-gendered monster that is active, but not particularly powerful or threatening. No challenges to gender exist because the monster is non-threatening and essentially the protagonist in a forced disguise.

While there are no victims in the film, there are certainly sidekicks. The main sidekick in the film is Gromit, though Lady Tottington does attempt to help at the end of the film. Gromit, like Wallace, is gendered male, even though in many ways his gender is irrelevant. Gromit is active, but obedient, much like the perceived action of canines. Though he cannot talk, he often exhibits more intelligence and powers of deduction than Wallace does. The film enables Gromit to take an active role, which is perhaps why it is important that the dog is male, in order to save Wallace/Were-Rabbit from Victor and his shotgun. Maybe the strongest challenge to gender is when Gromit works as the puppeteer to a fake female Were-Rabbit. While Gromit does not assume drag, he certainly performs the actions of female flirting and seduction. Judith Butler contends that drag is one of the greatest challenges to gender performance because it shows the strict contradiction between sex and performed gender behaviors. Though Gromit does not adorn female clothing, his physical actions and performance show a contradiction between his label as male and his ability to perform the actions of female, with at least enough success to attract the male Were-Rabbit.



While this moment presents a challenge to the monolithic approach of essentialist gender, the film quickly forgets Gromit's performance and closes with Gromit fighting off Philip, a bulldog, in an extremely active and masculine chase scene. This ending works to override the image of Gromit and his feminine performance and works to conclude with the image of an active male savior who uses a fake airplane to eventually rescue his friend. The film reinforces traditional gender roles for all character types. There is even a clear coupling between Wallace and Lady Tottington at the end of the film, which provides the feeling of a happily-ever-after. Overall, *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit* does not exhibit any of the more liberating gender roles in mainstream horror and more closely aligns itself with children's animated film genre, which is unfortunate due to the rich gender roles present in British comedy films, especially using animation. The film's generic hybridity serves to lesson aspects of the horror genre and focus more upon the comedy genre. Even though the film and franchise are not particularly aimed at children, especially in England, its participation within the medium of animation establishes it as a children's film in the U.S., thus it is primed to mimic the children's animated film genre, not mainstream horror.

### ***CORPSE BRIDE (2005)***

Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* perfectly aligns with its Burton horror predecessors in terms of visual aesthetics and characterization, including *Vincent*, *Frankenweenie* (live-action), *Beetlejuice*, and most notably, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The bifurcation between a boring, "normal" world and a more exciting secondary world is at the root of this 2005 film. The Land of the Living exhibits hues of gray along with somber music; Victor is member of the nouveau riche and plans to marry Victoria, the daughter of an old-money family with no money. After a disastrous wedding rehearsal, Victor absconds to the dark and assumedly deserted woods

to rehearse his marriage vows. In a particularly animated recitation, Victor accidentally slips the wedding band on the finger of the corpse bride, Emily, who whisks her new groom the Land of the Dead to begin her happily-ever-after. The Land of the Dead is full of color, vibrant music, and unique characters. After attempting to trick Emily and escape the Land of the Dead, Victor finally agrees to the marriage, and the entire secondary world enters the primary world so the happy couple can get married; in order to be married, Victor must drink a cup of poison in order to die so that he might live with Emily forever; however, Emily realizes she is keeping Victor from his true happiness and reunites Victor with Victoria; Lord Barkis is not happy about the reunion and mockingly makes a toast to “the bridesmaid who is never the bride,” and unintentionally kills himself with the poison Victor prepared for his own ceremony. The characters from the Land of the Dead drag Lord Barkis back to the Land of the Dead, and the Land of the Living resumes in normalcy, and of course, a happy union of Victor and Victoria.

As with many Burton films, this film heralds the lone, male outcast (here voiced by Burton favorite Johnny Depp) as its hero and focus of attention. Despite the title of the film, the character of Emily, the Corpse Bride, is a mixture of an assumed monster figure, victim, and sidekick, not the protagonist of the film. Victor’s agency grants him action within the film. In later children’s animated films, the outsider male protagonist has issues performing proper masculinity or masculine characteristics due to his marginal status; however, Victor’s status as an outsider does not seem to affect his performance of essentialist masculine stereotypes. He performs a majority of the actions: leaving the rehearsal, placing the ring, escaping the Land of the Dead through manipulation and cunning, consenting to marriage, etc. The main reason his status as an outsider does not affect his masculinity is due to the fact that his outsider status is rooted in an economic division. Most of Victor’s poor social performance stems from his status

as the nouveau riche. Since he was not born into a socially elite family, he does not know the correct social behavior. The distinction between old money and new money is isolating in the Land of the Living; however, the source of monetary difference has no bearing in the Land of the Dead where most of Victor's interactions occur. In the Land of the Dead, we do not know any character's previous social, wealth, or occupational status. Since systems of economy do not exist in the Land of the Dead, Victor's outsider status does not translate in that realm. Even though he is an outsider as the only living person in the Land of the Dead, the inhabitants of this world seem to accept him as Emily's new companion without much regard to his living status. Thus, the liberating potential of Victor's outside status on his performed gender role is undermined and ignored by creating two bifurcated spaces under different economic systems, unlike later films which use the outsider status as a way to rewrite some elements of masculine gender performativity.

While the lone male protagonist is easy to identify, the monster and victim in the film are far less clear. Emily, the Corpse Bride, is the character who most physically resembles a monster popularly depicted in the subgenre. Her reanimated corpse firmly establishes her as a zombie character, which rises from the dead upon the placement of the ring. Danny Elfman scores the film to incite terror at the moment of her resurrection, with animated parallels of the ground shaking and trees moving; however, outside of the initial terror, Emily is depicted as completely normal and sympathetic, which removes any threat she once posed. Her migration from the Land of the Living to the Land of the Dead recontextualizes her and normalizes what was abject in the Land of the Living. While her status as a corpse helps with depicting her as monstrous, when she rejoins the Land of the Dead, her status makes her fit and removes all abjection from her

character. Thus, Emily is not a monster, despite her aesthetic similarity to other monsters in children's animated horror films.

Like the other two films explored so far in this chapter, there is a clear antagonist of the film, but he is fully human and does not really classify as a monster as much as he does a regular villain. He does betray Emily and attempts to do the same to Victoria; however, since he is just an evil human, not a monster, it is almost impossible to classify him as such. Since there is no real monster in the film, the most victimized characters appear to be Emily and a lesser extent Victoria. First, and potentially most historically rooted, is that both women are victims to Victorian England's stringent gender expectations, which allows both women to be preyed upon by Lord Barkis, a man from old money who intends to kill the women in order to secure his societal position. Lord Barkis actually kills Emily for her dowry, so she seems to be a more prominent victim than Victoria, who only falls under the threat of Lord Barkis' financial scheme.

At a glance, these two victims of circumstance (rather than victims of a monster) are both females who know their gender roles and perform them well; however, Emily challenges traditional notions of femininity, especially post-death. In many ways, death frees Emily from the expectations of adhering to traditional performances of femininity. Her residence in the Land of the Dead means she literally escapes her Victorian England gender limitations. Her appearance is ghastly (or ghostly) and her suitor, Victor, is at first repulsed by her appearance, not infatuated with it. Though she waits inactively in the woods for years for a proposal, once she has the ring, she is the one who pursues Victor and talks to the priest to see how to make the marriage binding for after life. While the marriage plot is one that most Victorian British literature details, the marriage plot of this film is ultimately decided by Emily, not Victor or Victoria. Emily willingly chooses not to marry Victor in order to enable him to marry Victoria. In

many ways, even though Victor is more active throughout the film, Emily and her ability to make her own decisions decides the fates of Lord Barkis, Victor, Victoria, and herself. While it seems that Emily's decision not to marry Victor indicates that she chooses his happiness over her own, the film ends with Emily transforming into hundreds of butterflies representing the peace that Emily obtains. She flies away from the situation that has so long confined her. Emily's cross status as visual monster and victim of circumstance allows for her to work outside of normal Victorian gender roles and show some liberating potential within this film.

The film does not have a strong sidekick figure. Victor is the protagonist, Victoria is the victim, and Emily assumes many parts of different characteristics. There is a host of townspeople, both living and dead, who appear; however, no one is there to truly help Victor. Emily eventually does help Victor by enabling his happily-ever-after; however, for a majority of the film she was working against Victor and his wishes to return to the Land of the Living. Victoria is not Victor's sidekick because she is absent for a majority of the film. When she does reappear at the end, she marries Victor's and facilitates the "happily-ever-after" of the film. This film, though it does have a more liberating female character than its predecessors, still recycles many of the essentialist gender depictions rooted in Disney's children's animated films. Emily is the title character; however, she has limited power within the film finds herself as victim to a male dominated and regulated marriage plot. By the time Emily gains her voice and agency, she literally disappears from the film, leaving only the active male protagonist and his new bride. If the film's balance was more equal between Victor and Emily, the Emily's could be unconfined from domestic relationships and eventually exercise autonomy, without the need to obliterate her character at the film's end. There are no instances of the power located in her position as the monstrous-feminine, the final girl, or cross-identification of monster with victim. The film

ultimately concludes with heterosexual coupling and happiness for its protagonist, leaving the literal corpse bride behind.

### ***MONSTER HOUSE (2006)***

*Monster House's* resemblance to mainstream horror films in terms of content and aesthetics, more so than children's films, creates the space to have more progressive gender portrayals, especially in terms of Creed's monstrous feminine. Though Constance, the disembodied spirit that is the monster house, is a powerful, complex female character, the other characters of the film conform to essentialist gender depictions and patterns found in mainstream children's animated films. The lone protagonist, DJ, is male and assumes the majority of the responsibility for combatting the monster in the film, ultimately being the source of its destruction. Victimization in the film avoids harming children, but rather has the monster consume rebellious teens and skeptical, though comedic, police officers. The two sidekicks in the film include a young boy, Chowder, as well as an intelligent girl, Jenny. The combination of the trio resembles the relationship between Harry, Ron, and Hermione of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. This combination allows Jenny to exercise some actions outside of essentialist gender depiction, especially traits of intellect and activity; however, the film ultimately reinscribes her as the love interest of DJ, not a character who desires or maintains her own power due to her perceived intellectual superiority. By examining the four character types within *Monster House*, one can see that the film seems to present more challenges to essentialist gender depictions than previous films in this subgenre; however, these liberating moments are not free from confining roles found in children's animated film.

The protagonist of the film is a young boy, DJ. Though he does not look like the male hero present in many Disney films, the audience perceives DJ not as a social outcast, but rather a

boy in the process of transitioning into adolescence, which creates a certain amount of awkwardness in his speech, actions, and appearance. The film establishes DJ as the protagonist by beginning the main plot at his house without the presence of adults. Slowly, the film introduces the perceived antagonist, as well as his sidekick, Chowder, and neighborhood candy salesman, Jenny. Even though the trio is active as a unit and as individuals, DJ's role is elevated to the most important and most active. For example, Chowder shows timidity in retrieving a basketball from Nebbercracker's property. DJ walks over to his crotchety neighbor's house and attempts to retrieve the toy. Though Nebbercracker does not want to return the toy, DJ stands his ground and fights for the basketball, ultimately leading to Nebbercracker's supposed death.

Another example occurs once the children enter the gothic, monstrous house. The explorer in the house is DJ, and his ability to move between rooms and his inquisitive nature lead to the revelation that Nebbercracker is not the monster, but rather Nebbercracker's wife, who is literally embedded into the foundation of the home. Upon entering the basement, the audience loses sight of Chowder and Jenny. Presumably, those characters are exploring the area as well, but we are only privy to DJ's actions and revelations. The other two characters assist in escaping the house, especially Jenny and her tip about irritating the uvula; however, DJ's actions are always the most important and most impactful in the film. Ultimately, DJ destroys the threat to himself, his friends, and his neighborhood. Like most horror protagonists, his task includes destroying the threat posed by the monster in order for normalcy to return. Chowder and Jenny aid him and even Mr. Nebbercracker supplies the weapon for destruction; however, ultimately, DJ must light the dynamite and throw it into the now mobile, monstrous home. DJ's courage and endurance is elevated above Chowder's timidity, Jenny's intelligence, and Nebbercracker's love.

Because of horror convention, we know that DJ must be the one to confront the monster who has for so long limited the way he lived his life.

As a sidekick, Jenny has the potential to break molds of female passivity and subordination because of her intelligence level. More than the male characters, Jenny is quick to assess the situation and offer plans of action. For the most part, Jenny conceives every plan executed by the trio. She invents the plan to enter the house, as well as escape the house. She introduces the idea that the house has human anatomy, which allows the trio to navigate the house, and ultimately shows DJ how to destroy the house; however, the film's ending does not grant Jenny much power or agency. Instead of being heralded due to her intelligence (like Hermione Granger), she becomes the love interest of the protagonist. With such a simple kiss, her identity merges with DJ and she becomes his girlfriend, instead of the girl whose schemes and plans saved the neighborhood. She loses her independent identity, and in return she assumes the identity of love interest.

Instead of focusing on victimization in the film, which only happens to adult males who exhibit a certain amount of skepticism or disregard for the property, I will focus on the monster herself. At the release and reception of the film, Constance was by far the most complex monster within the subgenre. Her gendering as female allows for a certain amount of female agency, which was long absent from children's animated horror films. Much like powerful females in Disney films, Constance must be a monster in order to obtain and retain any sense of actual agency and power. Disney villains include powerful witches, queens, and stepmothers so that the defeat of the villain also marks the re-emergence of the model of female passivity and lack of agency. Due to her gargantuan size, Constance starts as an abject figure even before her death because she is literally separated from society and participates as part of a travelling circus's



freak show. Constance is not inherently monstrous. Due to her participation in the show, she is treated more like an animal, than a human being. Her personal living quarters consist of a large cage with absolutely no amenities. She endures verbal and physical abuse from the crowd, which rouses her anger and causes her to physically lash out and shriek like an animal. The abuse she suffers establishes her as a victim of society; however, her victimization ultimately leads to her own monstrosity.

After being rescued by Mr. Nebbercracker, Constance begins to assimilate to normal society. She becomes married, and the happy couple begins to build their own home together. However, Constance realizes that while she is not locked in a cage or put on a stage for performance, local kids still feel the need to verbally and physically abuse her. While trying to scare the kids from her property, she accidentally stumbles into the space for the new home's foundation, and is ultimately covered in concrete. Her physical death does not remove Constance from the scene, but rather eradicates what little humanity she had retained in order to replace it with complete monstrosity. Constance performs her most monstrous actions as the disembodied spirit that possesses the neighborhood house. Due to the tormenting, she dislikes children so much that Mr. Nebbercracker serves as the neighborhoods' source of protection from what Constance can truly accomplish. After the presumed death of Mr. Nebbercracker, Constance, at first, mourns his absence, but then seeks revenge on the neighborhood, in general, and DJ specifically.

Constance is most active when not confined and regulated by Mr. Nebbercracker's protective spirit. Until Nebbercracker's removal, the audience is led to believe the Nebbercracker himself is the monster because his activity confines Constance's power and desire for revenge. Upon his absence, the hearth in the home sets ablaze, and Constance's agency begins. For the

first time, she is not confined by cage or marriage, but rather allowed to act. Immediately following Nebbercracker's departure, Constance menacingly calls DJ and consumes the young rebellious teenager, Bones. After the consumption of the police officers, the trio enters the house in order to destroy it; in this moment, Constance's status as truly abject and monstrous emerges. For Julia Kristeva, the abject body is one that leaks waste in order to violate the desire for cleanliness, order, and propriety. Once the children enter the house, the house begins to hemorrhage fluid. In a mixture of symbolic stomach acid and saliva, the children rise from the basement to the main floor. Their only chance of escape is the irritation of the house's uvula, a chandelier, forcing the house to literally vomit them and the liquid onto the front lawn. The expulsion of fluid in this scene continues to depict Constance as an abject figure.

Soon after Nebbercracker's return, Constance becomes uncontrollable and exercises her agency by literally uprooting herself and taking her first steps. Though Constance has been an active monster throughout the film, her literal movement serves as a reminder that her power is not easily escapable or limited. Unlike other gothic houses, Constance's power is not confined to the domestic space of the house, but rather she is mobile and can exercise her power in public spaces such as the construction site that the characters arrive at for the final battle. Removing domestic and mobile limitations, Constance loses some of the sympathy she garnered as a victim of society and gains the aesthetic appearance and label of monster. She develops angry eyes and sharp, gnashing teeth. She no longer only is stripped of humanity, but rather she is also infused with monstrosity. This transformation allows for the destruction of the monster without animosity towards the protagonist. Once DJ demolishes the house, Constance's spirit assumes human form, bids farewell to her husband, and is finally "free."

With the physical demolition, however, comes the destruction of the power and agency that Constance exercised. The film suggests that Constance is most free when she is in human form and reconciled with her husband; however, this reading ignores the type of freedom that Constance experiences as the monster itself. For the first time, she is able to perform the actions she chooses without limitation or reparations. She is not confined to the domestic space of a cage or the interior of the house; she is able to move freely throughout the neighborhood. The film labels Constance's agency as monstrous, and thus labels the destruction of those actions as freeing. Therefore, while Constance acts according to Creed's monstrous feminine, the film reinscribes this liberating character into essentialist female gender performance of a passive, gentle, and kind wife, while simultaneously removing her abjection. Despite the fact she is still physically large, she is not marked as set-apart from society, but rather finally included and not demonized. The elimination of abjection and monstrosity also then removes Constance's participation within a more liberated role.

While DJ's position as the protagonist reinforces traditional gender depiction, the inclusion of the intelligent Jenny and the monstrous Constance helps break the mold that was established within this subgenre. It is not a coincidence that *Monster House* is heralded as the first truly scary children's animated film and the one that helps liberate strict adherence to essentialist gender depictions. It is because of its participation with mainstream horror that film has liberating moments. By implementing concepts such as the monstrous feminine, *Monster House* presents a film with more liberating possibilities than others in this subgenre; however, ultimately the need for a happily-ever-after ending destroys the monster in the name of freedom and love and makes Jenny's intelligence subservient to being DJ's love interest. While this film is a step in the right direction, it ultimately reinscribes all of its characters back into essentialist

gender roles in order to achieve normalcy. While the power of female characters of the film disappears, it does not mean that the film is unsuccessful in challenging gender. The challenge is there even if the film concludes in a limiting way.

### ***IGOR* (2008)**

The critically unremarkable *Igor* serves to challenge animated gender depictions, especially in terms of the protagonist and monster. Igers are a group of disenfranchised lab assistants; however, the main Igor is the protagonist of the story. While Igor is partly granted the agency of a male, his status as a social outsider, marked by his obvious hunchback, means that Igor often performs a subservient role of submission and obedience, usually portrayed by female characters. His ability to explore both prosocial and antisocial traits challenges the bifurcation endemic to the children's film genre. Additionally, Eva, the aesthetic monster of the film, is simultaneously granted power, but that power is lessened the more Eva performs stereotypical femininity, as opposed to threats. As briefly explored in chapter two, Igers, as a disenfranchised social group, are the main victims of the film; therefore, I will not explore the victimization in detail because Igers are not a victim of the monster, Eva, but rather the social classes in the kingdom of Malaria that are divided based on disability. Lastly, Igor's sidekicks of the film, Scampers and Brain, are both male and assume an incredibly active role in the narrative. Within this narrative, there is another set of sidekicks, Igers themselves; they serve as assistants to the mad scientists and enable the creation of a variety of evil inventions. While most Igers are male, one lone female Igor, Jaclyn, demonstrates strict the connection between adherence to stereotypical femininity and the subservient role of Igers. By focusing on three of the four character types, the gender depiction of this film becomes more complex, not because it adheres

to traditional mainstream horror, but rather because the victimization and servitude of the Igor class allows for non-traditional depictions of masculinity.

First, the protagonist of the film, Igor, does not resemble many other male protagonists within the children's film genre, nor does he look like a main character from a mainstream horror film, with the possible exception of Quasimodo. Even when compared with the "Hunchback of Notre Dame," Igor is far more aesthetically pleasing than other hunchback counterparts are. Several film critics even described Igor in terms of cuteness, which is generally acceptable for princess characters, but rarely occurs when describing male protagonists. Igor does not only deviate from traditional masculinity in looks, but also in actions. At first, it appears that Igor's agency is limited because he is only granted actions that are acceptable according to his society, and more specifically the mad scientist to whom he is assigned. His status as an Igor greatly limits his agency; however, the film does grant Igor a certain amount of agency once his scientist, Dr. Glickenstein, dies; he assumes the role of mad scientist and creates the Frankenstein-esque monster, Eva, pieced together from a variety of mismatched parts. Even though he has the power to create Eva, he does not actually create a monster; his actions are often failures in one way or another. Because he did not create an evil invention, Igor must take Eva and get her brainwashed into a monster; however, even this action fails, so Igor assumes the task of teaching Eva to play the part of a monster.

The issue of performance is paramount in this film, which much like drag performance directly calls into question the possibility of any naturalized actions versus performative actions. Early in the film, the audience discovers that Igor performs the role of an Igor, but shares little in common with the stereotype, other than the hunchback. In Malaria, Igors have a physical deformity, a speech impediment, and a perceived intellectual disadvantage. While Igor does

have a hunchback, he only speaks with an impediment when around other mad scientists, which rarely occurs, and his intellect far exceeds that of the mad scientist he serves, which shows that he performs the role of submission not because he exhibits all the characteristics of an Igor, but rather he chooses to perform those societally defined characteristics. Though Igor's position as a male does not call into question gender performativity, the fact that issues of performance are present within the narrative helps combat essentialist and naturalist views in general, allowing the space to call into question actions, in general and the possibility of gender, specifically.

This film, like *Monster House*, has an aesthetic monster that is gendered female. Upon her creation, Eva looks like a patchwork creation and feminine. In her silence, Igor assumes she is monstrous; however, he soon realizes that he did not activate her "evil bone." It is only after the carwash that Eva assumes the traits of extreme femininity. Though anatomically Eva is a woman, it is not until she is taught a specific type of being that she exhibits traits traditionally associated with being feminine. She suddenly becomes concerned with the way she looks and sounds. Even though she still appears fragmented and unattractive, she attempts to improve her looks with make-up, a new hairstyle, and new clothes. She has a sudden desire to appear feminine, as well as enact certain stereotypical gender roles. For example, after a long rehearsal session, she becomes romantically attracted to Igor and becomes jealous of Igor's other "love interest," Heidi.

Eva's monstrosity is lessened and perceived as non-threatening at the evil science fair because somatically she is coded as female and feminine. When Dr. Schadenfreud activates her evil bone, she appears as an aesthetic violation to normal coded female appearance, but she does not seem to pose a physical threat to the other inventions or the crowd gathered to watch. The science fair commentators associate her gender with a weakness when they utter the phrase, "She

is fighting,” in utter surprise and skepticism. Later, they admit that “She is winning,” and “Leave it to Schadenfreud to destroy his enemy with a big girl in a red dress.” Even in her most monstrous moment, Eva is still reduced to her gender, “female,” as well as her adherence to gender dress codes. Eva’s lack of monstrosity does not stem from her physical appearance; she is not an attractive female and her mismatched body parts are evident for all to see. While she is a cute version of Frankenstein, she is still a disembodied and reassembled creation. Her lack of monstrosity stems from her adherence to traditional femininity. She is highly concerned with her physical appearance, including how she dresses, and often does as male characters, such as Igor and Dr. Schadenfreud, tell her. She has the ability to pose a threat, but her threat is minimized due to her gender performance. At the end of the film, she gets to choose who she wants to be. She ultimately rejects the monstrous part of her creation, and focuses on being a female, adorned with an ornate dress, over the top make-up, and a love interest who wants to settle down and have a dog together. Unlike Constance in *Monster House*, Eva’s gendering as female removes her threat and negates her monstrosity, even during her most threatening and powerful moments.

Igor’s sidekicks in the film are rather unremarkable in terms of challenging or conforming to gender expectations. Scampers is a male, suicidal rat that can never die and Brain is an unintelligent brain in a jar that is often confused. Both of these characters are active, maybe even more so than Igor himself and perform heroic actions in order to save Igor and allow a happily-ever-after. More importantly than the two sidekicks is the role of the female sidekick. The only female sidekick in the film is Jaclyn/Heidi (yes, pun intended). For most of the film, Jaclyn is the sidekick and love interest of Dr. Schadenfreud. Later, the film reveals that Jaclyn changes her look, at least twelve times, in order to woo other male scientists and steal their secrets for the benefit of Dr. Schadenfreud. Jaclyn is the ultimate performer of femininity. Every

character that Jaclyn performs is coded as ultra-feminine in appearance and dress. In order to interest the mad scientist, she performs the role of devoted girlfriend. Each character is wholly infatuated with the scientist. The fact that she has the ability to perform so many different roles confirms the idea of gender as a performance. Ultimately, even her identity as Jaclyn is a performance. While the audience assumes that Jaclyn is her natural form and she appears as twelve other women, the fact is that Jaclyn is an Igor and must take medication in order to morph into her “natural form” of Jaclyn. Jaclyn’s performance enables the economic system of evil inventions in Malaria and aids Dr. Schadenfreud in obtaining a powerful position. Once that system collapses, Jaclyn is forced to assume her Igor form and sell refreshments at a theatrical performance. The juxtaposition between Jaclyn as an Igor and Jaclyn in at least two other physical forms challenges the idea of essentialist gender. The Jaclyn present for most of the film does not display her “natural female form” or behaviors. Her decision, with the aid of medication, helps alter her physical appearance, voice, and even the name associated with that particular identity. The fact that she can transform into many different women so readily critiques the essentialist assumption that gender is a fixed, innate biological construct. Jaclyn’s many forms indicate that gender is a performance, one that can appear in many variations, and in this particular instance through the agency of the performer.. Although she acts on the behalf of other scientists, she has the power and agency to change her physical form. The ability to choose to perform breaks the mold of perceived passivity, especially on the part of the characteristic of a sidekick.

*Igor*, for all of its dismal critical reception, does stand as one of the few films that challenge both essentialist depictions of masculinity and femininity. Igor’s characterization as a male who is only granted partial agency helps combat the connection between masculinity and



activity, as well as associating the masculine with the heroic. Jaclyn's multifaceted depictions show a certain amount of agency in the sheer ability to perform certain gender characteristics. The fact that she assumes many different identities, all on a spectrum of femininity, not one specific role, helps debunk the association between femininity and passivity. Jaclyn actively performs femininity. Unfortunately, the film does strip the monster of the power associated with the monstrous feminine by highlighting the feminine and allowing her gender to remove the monstrous. While the critical engagement with gender is complicated and not strictly challenging, this film, more so than other children's films, depicts gender in a complex, non-monolithic manner.

### ***CORALINE (2009)***

Of the nine films that comprise the children's animated horror film subgenre, Henry Selick's 2009 *Coraline* serves as the biggest challenge to essentialist gender portrayal implicit to the children's film subgenre; it mirrors more liberating gender roles of mainstream horror film by classifying the title character as protagonist and victim, while also gendering the monster as monstrous feminine. While the film itself is more liberating than other films in this subgenre, many of the gender messages in this film are owed to Neil Gaiman and his original novel, *Coraline*. Aaron Drucker and Tara Prescott contend that in all Gaiman's fiction, "he illustrates, narrates, and complicates feminist concerns" (3). Coralline Dupuy argues that Gaiman is able to challenge gender by adhering to traditional genre expectations, but deviating from some of its central characteristics (136). Gaiman's participation within fairy tale, fantasy and horror and his willingness to deviate from the male protagonist/female victim dichotomy enable Henry Selick to create central, empowering female roles in his film that are unlike all other films before it and after it within this subgenre. By placing Coraline as the protagonist, the character who must live,

and as the victim, the character who faces threat from the monster, Selick's Coraline stands among horror's Final Girl(s) Alice (*Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*), Laurie Strode (*Halloween*), and Dana Polk (*Cabin in the Woods*). Coraline is female, but has the agency to face and defeat the monster in the film. In addition to Coraline, Other Mother represents yet another powerful female in this film. She is not only a female monster; she embodies the monstrous feminine. Creed cautions that, "the term 'female monster' implies a simple reversal of 'male monster'. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience . . . The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (3). Other Mother is a monster not just because she is physically threatening, but more so because she uses her role as a maternal figure to create fear in Coraline. While Coraline's sidekick Wybee and the Black Cat (gendered male), problematize the gender portrayal in regards to Coraline's agency and power to remove the monstrous threat, the film's use of a female protagonist and maternal monster set a new precedent both within the subgenre of children's animated horror film and in the genre of children's films, in general. More than other films, Coraline echoes the liberating gender portrayals found in mainstream horror films.

As of this writing, Coraline stands as the only female protagonist in this subgenre. The designation alone indicates how strictly children's animated horror films adhere to the bifurcation of female passivity/ male activity, which is most prominent in Disney films, especially before the Renaissance period in 2009. In order to have a female protagonist, the protagonist must be granted enough agency to be an active character to hold the attention of both younger and older viewing audiences. Even more groundbreaking is Coraline's dual status as a protagonist and a victim. Female victimization is not an original concept in animated films.

Disney's first animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), had a female title character who was victimized by her evil stepmother. One main difference between Snow White and Coraline is that while Snow White is the title character, she does not seem to be the protagonist. For a section of the film, she is in a complete vegetative state, presumed dead. She serves as the first example of female passivity and victimhood in children's animated full-length features, and unfortunately she is not the last. Coraline operates not only a title character, but also the instigator of her own actions. Instead of being run out of the kingdom due to fear, she willingly leaves her real world home and enters into the Other World. Even when present in the Other World, Coraline embarks on adventures, visiting her neighbors and exploring the outside landscape. Coraline's actions are far less reactive and more motivated by her own desires.

Coraline functions as one of the few children victims within this subgenre, in addition to her status as protagonist. She faces tangible physical harm at the hands of a monster by experiencing the threat of eye removal, as well as a lifetime of captivity. Due to the presence of other ghost children, it appears that permanent captivity results in a physical death and eternal entrapment. In a subgenre with so few children victims, Coraline experiences a true physical threat that she, as the protagonist, must overcome in order to survive. Her dual status as protagonist and victim creates Coraline as one of Clover's Final Girls. Coraline fits the aesthetic and behavioral attributes of this horror stock character. For instance, Clover emphasizes the Final Girl's participation in masculine behaviors. Unlike the domestic confinement of many female characters, Coraline adventures outside of domestic spaces frequently in this film. She plays in nature, views thespian performances, and wanders from place to place. Her domestic confinement does not exist until Other Mother traps her in the Other World. Additionally, Coraline does not exhibit essentialist female behaviors of passivity, altruism, or concern with

physical appearance. By participating in the activity associated with masculinity and not the passivity of femininity, Coraline aligns herself as a Final Girl.

Coraline's asexuality is another categorizing feature of her status as a Final Girl. In slasher films, the monster punishes the sexually active or promiscuous while the asexual or virginal girl is often saved from destruction or at least saved as the last victim. Coraline's status as a child protagonist suggests that she would be a virginal character because of society's spoken objection to the sexualizing of childhood; however, children's animated films often present a protagonist and a love interest that often ends with traditional heterosexual romance, marked with a kiss or hand holding. Coraline is not interested in the only male character her age, Wybee. In fact, in her perfect alternate world, his mouth is sewn shut so she does not have to hear him speak. She dismisses him through most of the film, even as a friend. By the film's end, Coraline befriends Wybee, but shows absolutely no romantic or sexual interest in him. This ending has led to conservative media, especially new sources like *The Advocate*, to label Coraline as a lesbian because of her refusal of heterosexual coupling in the film. The film depicts Coraline, not as a lesbian, but rather as asexual. She does not show interest in romance or sex, which helps establish her as a Final Girl character.

Coraline's masculine traits and asexuality are prominent, but Coraline is also granted the "investigative gaze," which Clover notes is an essential attribute of the Final Girl. In many films, gaze within the film is granted to male characters only and female gaze, if recognized, is punished often with death; however, Coraline as an explorer is the gaze we, as an audience, are privileged to. We only view the film through her perspective; therefore, not only is she granted an investigative gaze, it is the privileged gaze in the film. These three characteristics classify Coraline as a Final Girl. This categorization is only possible because Coraline is the subject of

the monstrous threat, as well as the protagonist who has the agency to destroy the threat by the end of the film.

Coraline's dual classification in the film is not the only site for a more progressive female character. Other Mother is the source of a majority of the power within the film. She has both the power of destruction and creation. Her classification as mother with certain reproductive abilities creates a monster that is not only female, but rather the monstrous feminine. Her maternal powers are the source of her threats; her gender and monstrosity are irrevocably and undeniably linked. For example, in addition to Coraline, Other Mother has brought three other children into the Other World. Instead of caring for them as a mother, she physically harms them, removes their eyes, and entraps them in a confined area in the house. She destroys their physical body and their connection to the real world. Her monstrosity is highlighted when she performs actions that are the opposite of maternal affection.

In addition to destruction, Other Mother has generative powers. In fact, she creates the aesthetic reality of the Other World to fit each child specifically. She creates a cast of characters that mirror a child's real world life in order to create a space of "comfort." She not only creates these otherworldly figures; she also controls them. Other Father admits to Coraline that Other Mother sent him to destroy her. She creates characters like Wybee, but silences him by sewing his mouth shut. The only character in the Other World that she seems to have no control over is the Black Cat. Other than this feline, Other Mother seems to have power within her own house as well as her larger domestic space that comprises the Other World. What appears to be outside of the domestic space is actually just constructed and recursive. Other Mother has complete control to create and populate the world in the manner she deems fit.

Another crucial aspect in the monstrous feminine is the abjectness of the monster. Other Mother is abject in two distinct ways. First, Kristeva explores the maternal as abject in *Approaching Abjection*. According to Kristeva, one must cast off the maternal in order to create a separate, subjective identity. Therefore, in order to create a subject, one must discard the object of creation. Additionally, Other Mother is abject because she is literally not part of the real world. She is set apart in her own separate world, which while they resemble each other, are not the same. Her name itself implies she is an “other,” not a self with a subjective identity. As much as she physically resembles Coraline’s biological mom, her abjectness refuses her to assume that form. Her button eyes alert Coraline to the danger that Other Mother is not her real mother, and by the end of the film, Other Mother’s physical transformation from humanoid to insect cements that Other Mother is an abject monster, not a maternal subject.

While there are two powerful female characters in this film, the sidekicks of the film work to remove a bit of agency from Coraline specifically. No other character, with the exception of Coraline, threatens Other Mother’s power. For a majority of the film, Wybee serves as the only other child and works to build a relationship with Coraline. In the Other World, Wybee is a silent companion to Coraline and essentially functions as Coraline’s plus one to her different adventures; however, after Coraline escapes the Other World for the second time and goes to destroy the key, Other Mother’s hand reaches up from the well. Instead of Coraline casting off the hand and sealing the well, Wybee, a silent character for the most part, enters the scene and saves Coraline from this lingering threat of Other Mother. For many readers turned viewers, this scene is a rather unfulfilling moment of film, especially since Coraline does not need Wybee to save her in the Gaiman’s original novel. The adaptive change from novel to film reinscribes Coraline as a victim who ultimately needs help in order to be completely safe from

the threat. Despite her cunning plans, the film does not grant Coraline the ability to save herself during the final threat. This alteration problematizes her active and independent attitude developed throughout the film.

Henry Selick's *Coraline* enters into a dialog with mainstream horror, more so than children's film, which is why we have not only a progressive female hero, but also why critics and scholars classify the film as one of the scariest films in the subgenre. Though the film does revert slightly to children's films' need for a female character to be saved, this small instance of the male savior does not negate the power and intellectual prowess that Coraline exercises during the film. While the ending temporarily undercuts Coraline's ability to save herself, it cannot undo the critical conversation with which the film enters with mainstream horror, especially by including the Final Girl and a monster that is the monstrous feminine. By casting two females in positions of power, the film works to challenge essentialist gender depictions within children's films. Additionally, the fact that the film has a powerful "good" female, as well as a strong female who is an "evil villain" enables power to be associated with femininity without being strictly demonized or destroyed. Though Other Mother can stand with the other cast of older, female villains like Ursula, Evil Stepmother, and Maleficent, Coraline's power helps create a space to see that agency and power can exist in female roles without demonization.

### ***PARANORMAN (2012)***

Children's animated horror films flooded the market in 2012, beginning with Laika Studios *ParaNorman*. Unlike the studio's previous release, *Coraline*, this film centers on a male protagonist, Norman Babcock, and his ability to communicate with the dead. Instead of creating a male protagonist that mirrors his predecessors, the film never depicts Norman as fully masculine due to his position as an outsider. Because he is a medium and a social outcast,

Norman appears more in tune with emotions, both his and others, as well as sympathetic toward the suffering of others. While the film depicts Norman in active moments, his parents comment that he should leave the house and perform the activities of other kids his age, which suggests that Norman frequently stays within the domestic space of home, not a public sphere. When examining the protagonist, I will focus on the way that Norman's outsider status creates a complex mixture of roles, thus combatting the division of essentialist gender roles. Victimization in the film is more complex than many other films in this subgenre. While the monster, Agatha, terrorizes the town, the true victims in the story include Norman and Agatha; neither are victims of the monster, but rather society. Norman is the victim of extreme bullying, especially at the hands of Alvin and the kids at school. Agatha, even more so than Norman, is a victim whose power to communicate with the dead is presumed as witchcraft. The young girl was unjustly murdered for her crimes, which causes her to seek revenge against the town; her victimization leads to her monstrosity. Agatha's dual role of victim and monster inextricably link these two characteristics, thus creating a sympathetic monster; however, her victimization does not lessen her monstrosity. The visual aesthetics of her power is unmatched in any other children's animated film. Finally, the sidekicks in the film are mixed gender and participate stereotypical gender associations, with the exception of Mitch's confession that he is gay. This declaration does not remove Mitch's participation with masculine traits, primarily because he mentions his homosexuality in passing at the end of the film as a shock value, not a legitimate explored sexual orientation. The sidekicks in the film do not challenge essentialist gender, but rather work to confirm it as a naturalized presence. Instead of debunking notions of essentialist gender through a strong female character, like mainstream horror and *Coraline*, this film challenges naturalized



notions of gender by creating outcasts who rework the character types of protagonist, victim, and monster.

Norman, as a protagonist, is one of the first of his kind. Stemming from anti-bullying campaigns in the 2000s, Norman's character is immediately recognizable as a social outcast and a bullied child. Instead of participating in age and gender appropriate activities like sports and camping, Norman enjoys watching B-rated zombie films with his deceased grandmother and talking to other dead neighbors. Immediately, Norman is not a normal male child, and his parents and fellow classmates spend a majority of the film highlighting Norman's abnormalities. As explored in chapter one, Norman is not the American generic child, and thus stands as a challenge to that encompassing term, as well as gendered expectations for said child. The stereotype established for male protagonists in horror, in general, include physical fitness and attractiveness; however, Norman's examination in the mirror highlights the attributes that make him unattractive, including his spiky, unmanageable hair. Norman's lanky body is contrasted with Neil's grotesque body and Mitch's physically fit and attractive physique. While Norman's character type is present as a sidekick in many films, his status as protagonist forces a reconceptualization of gender in the film. He does not fulfill stereotypical masculine depictions; however, as the main character we must redefine normal, or refuse that label altogether, in order to journey with the protagonist. This refutation or redefinition forces the audience to rethink gender, especially in terms of masculinity.

Norman's foil character, Agatha, does not present the same challenges to essentialist gender in her childlike form. In the small exposition we receive of Agatha's past, she is a shy, timid young girl. Much like Norman, she is a medium and can communicate with the dead; however, instead of just being a social outcast, the town finds her guilty of witchcraft and

sentences her to death. These two characters are similar in looks, they are distantly related biologically, as well as in personality traits; however, while Norman's social outcast position challenges essentialist gender depictions, Agatha conforms to normalized gender traits, especially for the historical period of her childhood. Thus, for many reasons, Agatha is a typical female victim; one who does not have the power to fight against social injustice and who eventually is made passive, at least temporarily, in her execution.

The liberating aspect of Agatha's character is her yearly rejection of passivity and return to terrorize the town as a monster. As the victim of the film, Agatha fits into a mold of many horror and children's film victims in terms of her gender; however, her dual positioning as monster and victim allows Agatha to assume an active status after death. While Agatha is a female monster, her status as the monstrous feminine is not fully detailed. She is an abject figure, even in childhood; however, her monstrosity is less linked with her gender than it is with her position as a social outcast. Like Norman, her ability as a medium creates her abjection, not her gender. While she does not encapsulate many of the attributes of the monstrous feminine, it does not mean her monstrosity is not powerful or threatening. While Norman's uncle, Mr. Prenderghast, pacifies Agatha yearly with a bedtime story, his death leaves the story untold and Agatha returns in full force for the first time since her death. Her first appearance to the town takes the aesthetic appearance of the silhouette of a traditional Halloween witch. Her participation as this stereotypical female monster is made threatening due to the aesthetic changes; the sky turns purple, and she is able to summon storms. Her appearance and power clearly threaten and scare the townspeople. Her most terrifying form comes when she sheds the stereotypical appearance of the witch and assumes the ghostly appearance of a child. Norman attempts to pacify Agatha by reading her a "bedtime" story. This action turns Agatha's ghostly

appearance terrifying by highlighting the young girl in yellow with bolts of electricity around her. She appears to be a mobile force field, and ultimately she does electrify Norman and the surrounding trees. This scene is one of the most terrifying scenes in the entire subgenre. The terror is not created because Agatha is the monstrous feminine, or even the most powerful monster in the subgenre; it is created through the stunning stop-motion-animation special affects and visual aesthetics. Although Agatha does not actually kill someone in the film, the visual aesthetics suggest a power that goes far beyond her actions. Therefore, the presence of menacing moments combined with the terror inducing aesthetics creates a female monster who has power far beyond her age and gender.

As with *Monster House*'s monster, Constance, Agatha's "freedom," removes the power the film grants her and she returns to her essentialist gender role with great rapidity. Her return to freedom is not a result of an actual physical defeat from the protagonist, but rather her own realization that she has turned monstrous. Granted, Norman plays a significant role in Agatha realizing her own monstrosity; however, he does not have to physically destroy her in order to remove her threat. For the first time in the subgenre, the male protagonist uses wit and empathy to remove the threat posed by the monster, not physical force and violence.

Even though Agatha's power disappears, the challenge to gender does not end. Norman continues to offer challenges to essentialist gender because of how he negotiates the return to normalcy with words instead of physical strength. Though Agatha's power as a monster is present and grants her an activity level outside of traditional femininity, the strict association with power and monstrosity does not challenge gender depictions. The film clearly demonizes female power. Once Agatha realizes her monstrosity, she willingly relinquishes and assumes the traditional model of passive femininity and becomes the victim/sympathetic character once

again; however, Norman's challenge to gender roles does not end at the conclusion of the film. Though he becomes the town hero, he ignores the fame and glory associated with heroics and leaves the scene, just as abnormal as before, with his friend Neil, not a female companion. The closing of the film does not negate Norman's deviation from his traditional gender role. While Agatha resumes traditional femininity, Norman continues to perform masculinity in a non-traditional way, contrasting other horror and children's film protagonist. The fact the film uses a male protagonist to challenge gender, instead of the monstrous feminine or a Final Girl, is groundbreaking for both the horror genre, as well as the children's film genre. In this way, *ParaNorman* enters into a critical dialog with both mainstream horror and children's film and equally contributes to a reconceptualization of gender in both genres. While *ParaNorman* is a film targeted toward an audience of children, it presents a new way for horror films to challenge gender apart from the traditional scholastic concepts that currently exist. It is an innovative children's film, as well as horror film, which helps legitimize the subgenre of children's animated children's films.

### ***FRANKENWEENIE (2012)***

Not surprisingly, Disney's 2012 release of Tim Burton's animated *Frankenweenie* was unsuccessful not only financially, but also in terms of challenging normalized gender roles. Gender scholarship critiquing Disney has been circulating for over forty years; however, this critical field of scholarship has yet to rid children's films of traditional Disney gender roles, as seen by *Frankenweenie*'s recycling traditional gender portrayal, instead of rewriting more liberating roles. In terms of its protagonist, *Frankenweenie* presents an all-American boy, who (while he assumes a position as a social outcast) does not truly challenge depictions of masculinity within the film. Victor performs a majority of important actions in the film and is

normalized by the sidekicks present in the film, mirrored after Universal monsters themselves. Creating characters equally as awkward and non-conforming to normalized appearance and performance allows Victor's gender performance as the protagonist to adhere to, rather than to challenge, stereotypical gender depictions. Like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, this film contains two different monsters: perceived and real. After Sparky's reanimation, the neighbors believe that Sparky is the monster. The real monsters of the film stem from the re-animation of other pets for the purpose of science, not love. The creatures of Colossus, Shelley, Mr. Whiskers, Sea Monkeys, and the Were-Rat pose the only real danger in the film. Upon their revival, they set out to terrorize New Holland's yearly festival. While the victims of the film are few, the real monsters create them, not Sparky. In a sense, all the townspeople who attend the festival fall victim, in a sense, to the reanimated pets. The main villain, Mr. Whiskers, kidnaps the main victim, Elsa, who like many cinematic horror victims prior to 1970s, does not have the ability to save herself. Only Victor and Sparky have the ability to save her and eventually defeat the final threat in the film. Victor's status as a heroic protagonist and the destruction of the real monsters allows a narrative closure that echoes many Disney fairy tale films. Victor saves the day and ensures a happily-ever-after for New Holland.

Much like Shelley's and Whale's Victor Frankenstein, Victor performs most of the pivotal actions in the film, most notably the resurrection of his dead beloved pet, Sparky. In order to reanimate Sparky, Victor must study the principles of science behind reanimation, ensure the presence of all the materials needed, exhume Sparky's lifeless body, connect all the devices together, and time it perfectly to an upcoming lightning storm. He then must actively hide Sparky, which has debatable success. He performs all of these actions singularly and in solitude. Additionally, Victor must use his intellect, cunning, and physical strength to obtain a

successful project, which all echo Hoerrner's masculine traits of animated male characters. After his classmates coerce Victor's formula for reanimation, he must work to contain the danger at New Holland's festival and save his friend and apparent love interest Elsa from the danger of Mr. Whiskers.

Even though Victor is a "nerd," and appears as a social outcast, his status as an outsider does not challenge gender roles in the same assertive manner as *ParaNorman*. While, like Norman Babcock, Victor favors indoor, isolated activities, he indicates that he can and even likes performing in public spaces as well. For example, his dad bribes him into playing baseball, and Victor plays the sport with no apparent hesitation to the physical setting or extreme pressure due to the crowd. Additionally, Victor works tirelessly to create a project to enter in the school science fair. While this work is isolating, he wants to show his finished project in a public space to be judged and deemed worthy. He participates, far more than Norman, in socially acceptable public activities and excels in his performance. Victor's performance in the domestic space and the public space seems more balanced in terms of quantity and enjoyment than that of Norman.

In addition to his participation in public activities, Victor's status as a social outcast amongst a cast of social outcasts diminishes the potential to challenge gender due to his outsider status. The sidekicks in the film are his fellow classmates, who comprise of four boys and one girl. Most of this cast of characters mimics popular horror movies. Nassor resembles Frankenstein's creature, while Edgar Gore (E. Gore) mirrors the classic Igor character echoed in many Frankenstein narratives. Outside of the Frankenstein franchise, Weird Girl resembles one of the twin girls from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, and Toshaki is the generic Asian character present in Japanese monster films like *Gamera* and American films such as *Godzilla*. The only character who does not echo a direct movie or movie franchise is Bob. All of the supporting

characters actively participate and intend to win the upcoming science fair. While they serve as Victor's competition, they also help Victor understand the difference between his creation and their creations and help him contain the threat posed by the monsters in the film, even though they are responsible for their release. The fact that the film hosts a school based on Universal monster characters helps normalize Victor. Unlike Norman, Victor is not surrounded by a popular cheerleader and stereotypical jock, but rather children who are equally as aesthetically outcast, if not more so, than Victor himself is. Thus, the presence of the sidekicks further serves to promote Victor as the normal, average, American male child, not a challenge to expected performance of masculinity.

Like Frankenstein's creature, the townspeople misunderstand Sparky's innocence because they fear the process of his re-creation. Therefore, the town perceives Sparky as a threat, and thus the monster; however, the eventual creation of destructive monsters presents foil characters that exonerate Sparky and allow for a happily-ever-after narrative closure. After his reanimation, Sparky, more specifically the shadow of Sparky, scares Bob's mom as she hangs laundry and a small child at the park. Once Sparky faces social rejection, he retreats to Victor's house in order to escape being seen as monster. The entrance of the new monsters does not challenge gender, but that stems from the creation of the monsters from un-gendered animals. While they have names, they are not referred to by gendered pronouns by their creators. Once in monster form, their gender is irrelevant and not noted. While refreshing that an animated film has un-gendered monsters, they do not do much in terms of challenging threatening male monsters or demonized female characters. However, their presence is necessary in order to achieve a happily-ever-after for this Disney film. As the protagonist, Victor must remove the threat posed by the monster; however, it would be downright un-Disneylike to have Victor kill

off his childhood pet and companion. Thus, the film must present real monsters so Victor can actively eliminate the threat while maintaining a positive, caring, and loving relationship with Sparky.

The real monsters do not create many victims within the film. The generic victims of the film are the townspeople of New Holland. It is their celebration that is ruined by the threat of monsters; however, outside of running and shrieking in terror, no one dies or even falls victims to great bodily harm. The only specific victim of the film is Elsa, who is kidnapped by Mr. Whiskers and carried to a nearby windmill, which eventually catches fire. In the short amount of time that Elsa is a victim, less than five minutes, the film depicts her as a character incapable of saving herself from Mr. Whiskers or the burning windmill. In genuine Disney fashion, the male protagonist must enter the scene, save the girl, and work towards narrative closure. Though Sparky helps Victor defeat Mr. Whiskers, Victor's heroism is still vital to the closing of the film. Sparky saving Elsa alone would not provide the opportunity to express the underling love between the male protagonist and the female victim. Not only does the film not challenge gender in terms of victimization, it also forces female victimization and male heroism into the ending of the film as the only option for happily-ever-after.

The film does not work to challenge gender in any of its character types. Instead, the film seems to actively recycle gender stereotypes from both the children's animated film genre and the horror film genre in order to force a heteronormative, Disney happily-ever-after. Disney's insistence and reliance on these dated and essentialist gender depictions is highlighted within the subgenre of children's animated horror films. Because this subgenre is dominated by studios and labels outside of Disney, most notably Laika Studios, challenges to Disney-defined gender exist and begin to open new pathways to new character types. In this midst of this innovation,



Disney's gender depictions stand in contrast and seem dated and unlike other character and character types within this subgenre. This film does not attempt use mainstream horror gender critiques to create complex characters that challenge traditional models of femininity or masculinity. Elsa is forced to be a passive victim to her uncle, as well as the monster in the film. Other than those facts, we know little about her character. If the film would have focused more on Elsa as a character, outside of her relations to the male characters in the film, space would be created to see Elsa's activity, not just her passivity. After releases such as Laika Studios' characters Coraline and Norman Babcock, Victor and his cohorts seem one dimensional and trite, and this recycling and lack of innovation accounts for some of the discrepancy in box office earnings. In order to stay viable in this subgenre, which relies on animation as well as mainstream horror, Disney must to some extent abandon the staunch gender portrayals endemic to its cannon and be willing to explore alternative characterizations of its protagonist, sidekicks, monsters, and victims.

### ***HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA (2012)***

The last animated horror film of 2012 and the biggest financial success is Sony Pictures Animation's *Hotel Transylvania*. Because of its use of pastiche of Universal horror and its reversal of horror into comedy, this film cannot be examined in the same manner as the other films within this subgenre. For example, this film depicts monsters as normal and humans as abject; however, since the audience realizes that humans are not monsters no abjection occurs and the threat posed by a monster never exists. Additionally, because there is no real monster or threat, there are really no victims in the film either. The film does have a well-identified protagonist, Dracula, and a cast of sidekicks, Frank, Wayne, Murray, and Griffin. The fact that Dracula and his sidekicks are all male does not challenge gender depictions, but rather more than

other films in the subgenre show males as active participants in the narratives and females as passive recipients of the actions. Though I cannot analyze monsters or victims within this film due to their non-existence, the categories of protagonist and sidekicks provide a rich site to examine the actions of the film as initiated by the male characters, while the women in the family structures are either forgotten, passive, or ignored. More than any other film in the subgenre, *Hotel Transylvania* relies on stereotypical gender depictions of animated films, instead of more liberating gender portrayals of mainstream horror.

Dracula, as a protagonist, performs traditional masculinity with absolutely no deviation. He acts as an over-protective father to his daughter, Mavis, and confines her to the walls of the hotel, which serves as a sanctuary for monsters. Even when he releases her and allows her to travel to a nearby town, he uses his staff to stage a human riot to scare his daughter back to the hotel for security. We rarely see Mavis in the hotel, but we do see Dracula constantly buzzing around the hotel checking on guests and planning every detail of Mavis' party, with little to no regard to her wishes and desires. When a perceived threat enters the hotel, Dracula works to remove the threat alone. He is the most active character in the film and uses his stereotypical monster behavior, entrancing eyes and sharp teeth, to get his way.

The sidekicks in the film are also male and perform far more actions than their female counterparts, though fewer than Dracula as the protagonist. Frank and Wayne both have wives; however, Eunice, Frank's wife, enjoys her spa days in absolute passivity, and Wanda, one can assume, is watching her twenty children alone while Wayne participates in planning and executing Mavis' party. Both Griffin and Murray are bachelor characters in the film. While they are just as active as Frank and Murray, they do not have passive female counterparts with which to compare activity levels. Ultimately, the film creates passive female characters by creating a

protagonist and sidekicks who are all male, but have female counterparts. In order to focus on the action of Dracula and his sidekicks, the film cannot focus on Mavis, Eunice, or Wanda.

Johnny, or Johnnystein as he is commonly referred, enters the hotel as human and is forced to dress like a monster in order to fit in. His presence in the hotel presents a direct challenge to Dracula. He attempts to change recreational activities in the hotel, Mavis' party plans, as well as become Mavis' love interest. Though his actions challenge Dracula, he does not change the gender dynamics of the film. If anything, he presents ways in which to inscribe the film further into the dichotomy of passive and active. While at the hotel, he assumes even more activity, thus there is even less focus on the activity of the female characters and more focus on male activity. Additionally, his departure from the hotel creates the opportunity for Dracula, Frank, Wayne, Griffin, and Murray to leave the hotel and enter into a public human space, but does not open up the same possibility for the female characters. Because of their absence in the plot, they have an assumed passivity in the narrative, while the male characters assume an even more active role in the public space.

Eventually, Dracula releases some control over Mavis, which is certainly progress given his active control over her thoughts, fears, and physical presence during a majority of her 118 year life; however, Dracula does not release Mavis to herself so she can explore the world and discover her own identity outside of her father. Rather, he is able to release his daughter to another male character, Johnnystein. In Dracula's eyes, Mavis is not mature enough for the world by herself; however, if she enters into the public space under the protection of Johnnystein, she will be protected, even if it is not by her father. Not only is the passing of Mavis between male characters reminiscent of old laws that regarded females as property, but also this passing is supposed to signal the happily-ever-after of the film. Johnny and Mavis "zing," which

indicates that they have officially participated in true love's kiss. Johnny is a catalyst of change, but not a revolutionary or liberating change.

Even though there are only two character types of analysis, the dominance of male activity, female passivity, and the exchange of Mavis from Dracula to Johnny, indicates that this film is far from progressive in terms of gender. Even more than *Frankenweenie*, this film serves to reinforce dominant essentialist gender depictions, not to challenge them. The pastiche and role reversal made the film such a financial success that the sequel is already slated and will be released in September 2015. Many of the original characters will return and even new forms of patriarchy will be introduced in the form of Mel Brooks as Dracula's father and Mavis' grandfather. While the film certainly helped add another dimension to the subgenre of animated children's films, its bifurcation of male activity and female passivity reflects the ways in which it participates in children's media, and not so much mainstream horror. The film's regressive depiction of gender, rather than progressive or subversive, does not bode well for future sequels and hinders the franchise's ability to dialog with current, mainstream horror, rather than Universal monster movies.

## CONCLUSION

Children's animated horror films conform to stereotypical portrayals of gender present in children's animated films, as well as horror tropes. Even though mainstream horror has become more progressive in terms of gender depiction, specifically due to the academic theories surrounding the genre, this type of progress does not always present itself within the subgenre of children's animated horror films. In many films, the presence of an active male protagonist and his ability to defeat the monster, regardless of the monster's gender, associates masculinity with activity. Comparatively, the lack of female protagonists and the presence of both female victims

and destroyed female monsters, maintains a connection, even if tenuous at times, between femininity and passivity. The presence of sidekicks, for a majority of films, offer the protagonist a nice, heteronormative return to normalcy and the presence of a “happily-ever-after.” The dialog between mainstream horror and children’s animated horror, however, cannot be ignored. Films such as *Monster House*, *Igor*, *Coraline*, and *ParaNorman* certainly challenge the monolithic depictions of gender and childhood by using theories that shape mainstream horror, such as the Final Girl, gender cross-identification and gaze, as well as Creed’s monstrous feminine. Since the subgenre has shifted to include some aspects of mainstream horror, especially gender critique, it cannot be isolated as only children’s entertainment. The incorporation of mainstream horror’s gender portrayals helps legitimize this subgenre outside of children’s media and allow for elicits more critical attention, not dismissal. The overall failure of this subgenre to address stereotypical gender messages is upsetting when acknowledging the power that horror has to combat these trite and damaging depictions. Since animated horror has no physical or social boundaries, it presents the ideal space to explore revised gender roles, unlike more realistic films that are bound by either live-action performance or realist narrative paradigms. The subgenre of children’s animated horror film holds the potential to revise gender roles for children’s film and horror films unlike; however, that potential is currently under-utilized.

After examining all nine films discussed in this dissertation, gender portrayal challenges emerge from studios that are less invested ideologically in essentialist gender. Some of the most stereotypical depictions of gender emerge from larger studios such as Disney and Sony, while Laika Studios presents empowered female characters, *Coraline* and *Other Mother*, as well as male characters who reshape the performance of masculinity: *Norman*. Studio affiliation plays a great role in the types of challenges that can be successfully posed to essentialist gender.

Disney's association of male activity and female passivity still earns the company billions of dollars, so they are less likely to want to deviate from a successful formula. The future of children's animated horror films lie in the hands of small, independent studios that are willing and able to take a risk, challenging monolithic and outdated gender depictions. The more films that emerge from Laika Studios and other smaller animation studios, the more space will be created to further the dialog between this subgenre and mainstream horror, eventually blurring some of the distinction and allowing the larger genre and subgenre to be considered equally.

## **POSTSCRIPT: THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN'S ANIMATED HORROR FILM**

While the term children's horror film appears paradoxical, this subgenre exists in order to address adult concerns regarding appropriate cinematic content for the American child; however, the utility of the subgenre does not end with pacifying parental apprehensions. Instead of viewing children's animated horror film as simple entertainment with the sole intention to amuse children and teach them the conventions of a popular cinematic genre, scholars must work to free the subgenre from such a limiting use. "(Re)-Animating Horror" has explored children's animated horror films in order to legitimize the subgenre as part of mainstream horror, as well as children's media. This project surveys various characteristics of Hollywood horror, such as monsters, gender, and postmodernism, in order to demonstrate the ways in which children's horror is becoming closer to the larger genre. The confluence of the two genres, children's film and horror, has produced films that simultaneously conform to genre characteristics, as well as blur the boundaries and distinctions between the two genres, creating a subgenre that requires serious critical consideration, not dismissal.

Though this subgenre emerged partly as a response to the blood, gore, and rated "R" violence of mainstream horror, especially the slasher and torture porn subgenres, and the classic Disney fairy tale cinema tradition. It has now moved beyond this rudimentary function and participates in a dialogue with all mainstream horror, not simply dated Universal monster narratives. Simply echoing classic, Universal monster cinema has created children's animated horror films that derive audience laughter, rather than screams; however, children's films that echo mainstream horror conventions in the use of threatening monsters, empowered female characters, and the postmodern characteristic of disruptions of the everyday world present narratives that belong to the horror genre just as much as the children's film genre. The

combination of mainstream horror and children's animated horror films creates the space to continue to legitimize children's films as a whole. Studios, like Pixar Animation, have often been praised for their creation of complex narratives that attract a wide range of audience members; however, the big studios often stand as exceptions to the rule of banality in the children's film genre. Children's animated horror films continue to emerge from a variety of studios, large and small, and their dialog with mainstream horror enables the narratives to receive critical attention, instead of dismissal because of their status as children's entertainment.

Because of its critical role in legitimizing itself as a subgenre, as well as children's cinema as a whole, the main concern with children's animated horror films relates to its sustainability as a present, active, and progressive subgenre. While live action films and mixed-medium films like *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) certainly have characteristics of this subgenre, Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) was one of the first fully animated films to start this subgenre and remained the only film for over a decade before Tim Burton released his next stop-motion animated film, *Corpse Bride* (2005). After this twelve year hiatus, the subgenre built momentum in the 2000s with a release almost every year following *Corpse Bride: Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit* (2005), *Monster House* (2006), *Igor* (2008), *Coraline* (2009). Though the subgenre was silent for three years, 2012 proved to be a year that facilitated the impact, dominance, and permanence of this subgenre with the releases of *Frankenweenie*, *Hotel Transylvania*, and *ParaNorman*.

The distance between release years should not cause alarm for viewing audiences or scholars interested in the subgenre. The reason there are breaks within the subgenre is not for lack of demand for new narratives or an exhausted list of ideas, but rather the medium on which children's animated horror films rely so heavily upon: stop-motion animation. The creation of



hundreds of puppets, armatures, costumes, and sets is a time intensive process and takes far longer than the current dominant style of computer generated animation. Additionally, stop-motion animation entails a shooting rate of fourteen frames per second, meaning that a normal ninety- minute stop-motion animated film requires a minimum of 75,600 unique shots with puppeteers moving the puppets and sets between every single shot. The medium of stop-motion animation, even with all of its technological advancements, does not allow for the same rapid production of CG animation. In this subgenre, six of the nine films explored are stop-motion animation, which indicates the dominance of this medium as a tool to create the aesthetics of children's animated horror film in all of its quirky and disturbing imperfections.

Another reason for the interval between releases concerns the studios from which these films are produced. While Disney can normally generate five or more films per year, smaller studios do not have the budget or production power to release films with the same rapidity. The dominant studio in this subgenre, Laika Studios, is a smaller film studio that specializes in stop motion animation, as well as CG in short films, commercials, and contract work. The difficulty of bulk production from the studio lies in its heavy use of stop-motion animation, as well as the limiting budget and production crew available. To current date, the studio has released three stop-motion animated full-length feature films, approximately two years apart: *Coraline* (2009), *ParaNorman* (2012), and *The Boxtrolls* (2014). The small company does not have the space, time, resources, or budgets to begin full production on more than one film at a time.

The two aforementioned reasons explain why there are occasional gaps within this subgenre's cannon. Additionally, the newest children's animated horror film release, *The Boxtrolls* (2014) indicates that this subgenre is not dying or reverting to simple tropes found in children's cinema. Rather, *The Boxtrolls* signifies that this subgenre is evolving and continues to

enter into dialog with mainstream horror films, addressing issues in new and interesting ways. By quickly reviewing how the film comments on American childhood, postmodern traits, and gender, it is clear that this film is not simply repeating commentary from its predecessors, but rather speaking in new and creative ways for both horror and children's films.

### ***THE BOXTROLLS (2014)***

Laika Studio's 2014 release, *The Boxtrolls*, begins with the "kidnapping" of the Trumpshaw baby by trolls dressed only in boxes. Archibald Snatcher, a working-class schemer, makes a deal with the town's prominent Lord Portley-Rind; in exchange for the status symbol of a white hat, Snatcher promises to entirely rid the town of the boxtrolls. After the exposition, the film begins ten years after the negotiation with Snatcher and his three co-workers riding around town, enforcing curfew, and capturing boxtrolls. After a failed attempt at capture, Fish, a paternal boxtroll, returns underground and the audience views boxtrolls in their own environment. Instead of including mountains of bones and rivers of blood, as the legend espouses, this underground world is full of boxtrolls who enjoy tinkering with the discarded elements of the human world. This underground expedition introduces the audience to Eggs, a seemingly human boy amongst boxtrolls, though he does not notice he is different. After Snatcher captures Fish, Eggs feels compelled to go to the surface and try to find him. In the process, he meets Lord Portley-Rind's daughter, Winifred. During the ten-year commemoration of the kidnapping of the Trumpshaw baby, Eggs discovers how the humans feel about the boxtrolls and is appalled at this well-accepted misconception. Once he discovers where Fish is being held prisoner, he ventures to the extermination factory and frees Fish; however, he sees the enslaved working conditions for the other boxtrolls. In the process to set the boxtrolls free, Eggs becomes captured. He encourages the boxtrolls to set themselves free by taking off their boxes.

He champions the prevalent children's film message of "You can change who you are." While Eggs believes the boxtrolls have been crushed, Snatcher takes Eggs, dressed like a boxtroll, to the town square to kill him; however, he is unable to succeed because the boxtrolls take heed of Egg's advice and work together and to free themselves. While Snatcher possesses the white hat for a short moment, he eventually is his own demise; he consumes cheese, has an allergic reaction, and eventually explodes into a cloud of powdered cheese dust. The film ends with the boxtrolls living in the human world, without persecution, and Eggs being reunited with both his biological father and his boxtroll parental figure.

*The Boxtrolls* is one of the greatest examples of a children's film that contain a political message, especially that of social class and the possibility/impossibility of achieving upward mobility. Moreover, this film, like other Laika productions, includes a protagonist who is a child. The character of Eggs continues to combat the myth of the American generic child, like his predecessors, by his call for action, not submission, as well as social status and non-traditional family structure. While Eggs is not as physically destructive as Coraline, he advocates for physical action against the oppressive force of adults. He tells himself and the boxtrolls to "stop hiding" and to "fight back." This call for action goes against the submissive attitude credited to a "good child." One reason Eggs' defiance is acceptable is because it is waged against the villain of the film, not the patriarch Lord Portley-Rind. Moreover, his plea for action is part of his heroic status. He calls himself and the boxtrolls to take action so the "good guys" are not destroyed at the hands of the villains. Ultimately, his actions against the exterminators are defiant, but justified in order to reach a more satisfying, peaceful and equitable social status.

While Eggs is male, which is typical of the American generic child, he is not middle-class, nor does he have the nuclear family structure touted by mainstream children's film.

Boxtrolls raised Eggs for the majority of his childhood; therefore, he does not belong to the upper class or even the working class as represented by Snatcher. He participates in the class that is both literally and figuratively lower than the lower class. While Eggs does not endure a lengthy enslavement, a majority of boxtrolls were captured, enslaved, and exploited for their physical labor. Eggs is the first child protagonist who does not belong to the middle or lower class; his character, for the first time, opens up a space to depict the poor social status and standing of children. Additionally, Eggs does not have the nuclear family of Coraline, Victor, or Norman. He was raised by boxtrolls and only discovers his biological father, who has fits of lunacy from long periods of captivity, in the last twenty minutes of the film. Eggs was raised primarily by Fish, but also as a community child. There is also a lack of mother figure in Eggs' life. Even though Eggs discovers his father, the mention of his mother is never given, even in his backstory. Additionally, there is no clear "female" or "mother" boxtroll that helps Fish raise Eggs. The promotion of non-conventional family structure is in the minority within children's films, which promote a mother-father nuclear family. *The Boxtrolls* helps combat the myth of the American generic child by combatting the only socially acceptable family structure since the 1950s. Even more than *Coraline*, *ParaNorman*, and *Frankenweenie*, *The Boxtrolls* attempts to refashion American childhood against its long, enduring myth.

The "monster" in *The Boxtrolls* cannot be easily determined because of the disparity between the proclaimed monster and the active monster. Like other children's animated horror films, the narrative verbally and aesthetically establishes a monster early on; however, as the action unfolds, the stated monster becomes benign, possibly even good, while a human character assumes monstrous actions. *The Boxtrolls* actively and deliberately challenges the dichotomy between good/evil endemic in classic horror paradigm, and instead presents a postmodern

metacommentary on the difference of good and evil. The exterminators inform the town of the horrible atrocities that boxtrolls commit. Boxtrolls kidnap children, eat their flesh, leave their bones, and allow the blood to run like a river. This information leads to early curfews for the town, as well as socially sanctioned efforts to capture and destroy the monstrous boxtrolls. The town holds a yearly celebration that perpetuates the myth of monstrous boxtrolls by retelling and reenacting the “kidnapping” of the Trumpshaw baby. This yearly celebration demonstrates the townspeople’s attitude toward boxtrolls. By the end of the performance, the townspeople shout “Kill the boxtrolls,” repeatedly while Eggs looks on in horror and disbelief. Even though the audience knows the boxtrolls are well-intended inventors and tinkerers, the humans within the film are invested in their assumed monstrosity.

While the town seems to support the monstrous narrative of the boxtrolls, *Snatcher*’s exterminator comrades seem to question the difference between good and evil frequently during the film. For example, during an attempt to capture boxtrolls, an exterminator, Mr. Pickles, states, “Do you think the boxtrolls understand the duality of good and evil?” Another exterminator, Mr. Trout, retorts, “They [the boxtrolls] must. Why else would they hide from us? We are the good guys after all.” This dialog is the first exploration of assumed monstrosity and an attempt to make audiences question who is the monster: the boxtrolls or the exterminators. Later, after the boxtrolls have proven themselves as good, Mr. Pickles once again questions who is good and who is evil: “Goodness always triumphs over evil, right? Right, Mr. Trout? I’m still 60-70% sure that’s us—a couple of good guys vanquishing evil.” The constant questioning of good and evil helps combat the aesthetic monstrosity and replaces it with monstrous actions. By the end of the film, the true monster is Archibald Snatcher, who lets class ambition and greed lead to the enslavement and exploitation of boxtrolls and humans. Ultimately, Snatcher’s

ambition to obtain the symbol of high social status, a white hat, leads to his ultimate grotesque transformation and demise. While Snatcher never aesthetically looked appealing, an allergic reaction to fine cheese in the tasting room leads to a grotesque transformation that includes engorgement of body parts like face, hands, and ear, as well as discoloration of his face and hands. Ultimately, his greedy consumption of the upper-class delicacy leads to him exploding and his permanent demise. Like all monsters, Snatcher is destroyed by the narrative's ending, and the good guys, including the boxtrolls, are able to partake in a happy ending.

In addition to the myth of the generic American child, monster functions, and good vs. evil, *The Boxtrolls*, potentially more than any other children's animated horror film, problematizes essential gender depictions through drag as well as a non-heteronormative ending. While film's like *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit* include a small amount of drag, *The Boxtrolls* focuses on drag through the character of Snatcher and his assumed female identity, Madame Frou Frou. This dual performance becomes the topic of many of the film's gags and jokes. Throughout her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler addresses the use of parody, especially drag, as an instrument to challenge the concept of original or natural gender and gender characteristics. She argues that the difference between the sex of the person in drag and the performed gender of the person in drag emphasizes the imitative nature of gender as a whole. Thus, the dichotomy collapses and the notion of naturalized gender is undercut by the clear performative gender produced (137-138). The drag in the film, though it does seem to be a joke, allows the audience to view gender in a non-essential or determined manner. The categories of masculine and feminine become fluid, not fixed, and unlike *Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were Rabbit*, the drag in this film is not a single instance, but rather a repetitive motif that occurs for a good portion of the film, not simply two minutes.

In addition to drag, the film does not end with a normal, heteronormative ending like most children's films. Undoubtedly, there is a happy ending. The evil in the film is destroyed and the protagonist and his family and friends are freed from a life of slavery and confinement underground. The town seems to have overcome its strict class bias by discarding the hat system. In rare form, this film finds its happily-ever-after by restructuring social positions and roles, not in a heterosexual coupling of the protagonist and a sidekick. At the end of the film, we do see Eggs and Winifred; however, they do not interact with each other outside of a quick question in passing. There is no lingering glance, hug, or kiss to connote a romantic relationship of any kind. They are both allowed to participate in separate activities. Winifred works as a stage performer who recounts Snatcher's demise, while Eggs rides around with Fish and his father tinkering with items in the town and listening to barbershop quartet music.

Instead of forcing a heterosexual romantic ending, the film focuses on righting the social injustices within the film. It dedicates time to displaying the symbol of social status, the hat, in the trashcan, and Lord Portley-Rind as a good and active father, rather than an elitist snob with no interest for the well-being of his own child. Additionally, the unjust separation of Eggs from his father is reconciled as Eggs rides around town with both of his fathers, not being forced to pick between biology and nurture. Even Mr. Pickles and Mr. Trout overcome their position as evil exterminators and find ways to fit in with the town, instead of at its margins. I do not mean to imply that the film ends unproblematically or in a utopian state. Clearly, social class still persists in function and through aesthetics. The exterminators do not suddenly become equal to the Portley-Rinds; they assume jobs as street sweepers and still look rather dirty, even though they do not have to dawn their red hats, and Lord Portley-Rind, minus his white hat, is still a wealthy, clean gentleman who has the epitome of a nuclear family. While the film does not

follow through with its critique of social class and its attempt to demolish class boundaries fail, it ultimately offers a more progressive ending than most children's films, especially within the subgenre of children's animated horror films.

## CONCLUSION

*The Boxtrolls* is an excellent example of where children's animated horror films are heading. This subgenre is certainly not slowing down or disengaging from mainstream horror genre. Instead, it is entering into even more interesting dialogs that further help categorize children's animated horror films as a legitimate subsection of both children's films and horror films. Unlike the long break between 1993-2005 and the shorter breaks between 2009-2012 and 2012-2014, there seems to be no break in the near future for this subgenre. In the fall of 2015, Sony Picture's is slated to release the much anticipated *Hotel Transylvania 2*. The following fall, Laika Studios recently announced their intention to release a new, original script *Kubo and the Two Strings*. This film promises to bring together American children's film, horror elements, fairy tales and Japanese fantasy narratives for a genre bending epic that details Kubo, who is, "on the run from gods and monsters. . .[His] chance for survival rests on finding the magical suit of armor once worn by his fallen father, the greatest samurai the world has ever known. Summoning courage, Kubo embarks on a thrilling odyssey as he faces his family's history, navigates the elements, and bravely fights for the earth" (Laika Blog). This film is one that can launch children's animated horror films into a conversation with international and global horror traditions, not just domestic films, much like *The Ring* (2002) did for mainstream horror. As this subgenre expands, further research and exploration will be needed to connect this subgenre to global cinema traditions such as anime, horror films, and children's films, both animated and live-action. Now that the U.S. has started its cinematic tradition of animating horror for a



younger audience, it is imperative that we do not forget its participation in global cinema, as well as the mainstream Hollywood horror tradition.

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