The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema

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Section One

Secrets and Hieroglyphs:
The Uncanny Child in American Horror Film
1. The Child and Adult Trauma in American Horror of the 1980s

Abstract
This chapter explores how definitions of childhood post Freud have become embroiled with ideas about adult trauma, as childhood is conflated with the adult unconscious in a Western context. This constitution is amplified in North American uncanny child films of the early 1980s. The chapter charts a shift in horror film depictions of children in the 1980s, arguing that the 1980s saw the emergence of a child character who symbolically functions as the site of the adult protagonist’s past traumas and repressed anxieties. This figure is at the centre of three influential horror films of the 1980s: The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), The Changeling (Peter Medak, 1980), and Poltergeist (Tobe Hooper, 1982).

Keywords: Uncanny, Childhood, Trauma, The Shining, Freud, Unconscious

Particularly in a Western context, contemporary cultural imaginings of the child are inextricably bound up with a generalized Freudian psychoanalytic model that injects ‘childhood’ with intense and multivalent symbolic charge. Virginia Blum suggests that in many senses, psychoanalysis – which she describes as ‘the most preeminent twentieth-century discourse about childhood’ (1995, 8) – brought the child in its current form into being via a new ‘investment in the child as the origin of the adult’ (1995, 3). As Blum elucidates,

psychoanalysis is the story of the adult’s relationships with an internalized, repudiated, but nevertheless ceaselessly desired child – not the actual child the adult has been, but rather the ‘dead’ child mourned by a present-tense self which is constituted on the past this child at once represents and withholds. (1995, 23)
This entails an uneasy conflation of ‘childhood’ – the originary stage of adulthood, temporally defined as the past in relation to the adult’s present; and ‘the child’ – a being of the present external to the adult’s psyche. As Carolyn Steedman suggests, between 1900 and 1920, Freudian discourse ignited a shift in the way Western societies understood childhood in relation to the concept of an interiorized self. She explains that psychoanalysis summarized and reformulated ‘a great many nineteenth-century articulations of the idea that the core of an individual’s psychic identity was his or her own lost past, or childhood’ (1995, 4). Steedman further asserts that ‘the process of repression that emerged from Sigmund Freud’s writing in this period theorised childhood in this sense, gave it another name as “the unconscious” or “the unconscious mind”’ (emphasis in original, 1995, 4).

This alignment of childhood with the adult’s unconscious – a constitution that has become entrenched in Western culture – is amplified in American uncanny child films of the early 1980s, and is central to these films’ deconstructions of conventional understandings of innocent, naïve childhood in ways that contrast with the possessed and devil child films of the late 1960s and 1970s. The early 1980s saw the emergence of a child character – a subject of the present external to the adult protagonist – who becomes symbolically entwined with the ‘past’ as the site of the adult protagonist’s repressed anxieties and traumas. This uncanny child figure is at the centre of three influential horror films of the 1980s, which are the focus of this chapter: The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), The Changeling (Peter Medak, 1980), and Poltergeist (Tobe Hooper, 1982).

Childhood and the Adult Unconscious

In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud details an imagined Rome in which ‘nothing that ever took shape passed away’, constructing a spatially impossible structure in which ‘all previous phases of development exist beside the most recent’ (2002, 8): what he describes functions like an elaborate trompe l’oeil in which particular stages of Rome’s development materialize before the observer depending on the angle from which they perceive the
structure. Freud utilizes this image to analogize how the earliest remnants of childhood memory remain lodged, albeit submerged or repressed, within the adult mind. As he explains in ‘Screen Memories’, ‘we must insist on the great pathogenic importance of impressions from this period of our lives’ as our ‘childhood experiences have left indelible traces on our inner selves’ (2003a, 3). Yet, according to Freud, the shift into adulthood inevitably distances one from and blocks access to the psychic realm of childhood – the child is, after all, culturally defined as that which is other to the adult, as is reinforced by Freud’s suggestion that ‘the psychical behaviour of children differs fundamentally from that of adults’ (2003a, 3) – in a function that, post Freud, has become synonymous with the ever-present but esoteric relationship between the conscious and the unconscious.

Freud highlights his association of childhood with the repressed content underlying adult complexes in his supposition that there are ‘intimate links [...] between the mental life of the child and the psychical material of neuroses’ and that investigation of childhood memories in adulthood exposes an elusive and ‘unsuspected wealth of meaning [...] hidden behind their apparent harmlessness’ (2003a, 8). This uncovering of the dark secrets of the adult’s unconscious via the dissection of childhood memories is central to Freudian definitions of trauma, a process that is referred to in Freud’s writings as Nachträglichkeit. This concept became the foundation of subsequent theorizations of trauma and has been translated in various ways, most influentially as ‘afterwardsness’ (Jean Laplanche, 1999) and ‘belatedness’ (Caruth, 1996). Stockton points out that Freud’s foundational model of trauma represents:

a ‘deferred action’, whereby events from the past acquire meaning only when read through their future consequences. Freud developed this view – sometimes called ‘the ghost in the nursery’ – as a way to explain how a trauma encountered in childhood – more precisely, received as an impression – might become operative as a trauma, never mind consciously grasped as such, only later in life through deferred effect and belated understanding, which retroactively cause the trauma, putting past and present ego-structures side-by-side, almost cubistically, in lateral spread. (2009, 14)

Freud thus positions the relations between childhood and adulthood as a tangled paradox: childhood is situated as a still-somehow-present past stage of adulthood, which remains impalpable to adult consciousness while holding the key to the most urgent secrets of the adult psyche.
This entwinement of closeness and distance is a crystallization of the (un)heimlich given anxious charge by the fact that childhood is construed as the vessel for the concealed enigmas of the adult's mind. Access to hidden impulses or traumatic memories is communicated to the adult consciousness only partially, through riddles and misleading screen memories. This process elucidates some of the most fundamental tensions existent in the ambivalently constituted differentiation between childhood and adulthood, and is self-reflexively augmented in constructions of uncanny children in 1980s American horror.

The preoccupation with the child's uncanny conceptual constitution represents a distinct shift from child-centred horror films of the 1970s, such as The Exorcist, which typically feature possessed or devil children. In his study of possessed child narratives, Adrian Schober argues that depictions of children in American horror film tend to reveal an ongoing ideological conflict between Calvinism and Romanticism. Schober's thesis can effectively be applied to narratives that centralize possession, as the child in such films wavers between evil and innocence, with 'the emptiness of the child [...] filled with the knowledge of evil' (2004, 60). Yet the uncanny child films of the early 1980s are no longer interested in dramatic constructions of the demonic invasion of the child's body, but in confronting directly the enigmas and temporal paradoxes that underlie the very 'emptiness' of the innocent child. Thus, unlike possession films, these films self-consciously draw out the deep conceptual contortions inherent to, but typically submerged beneath, Romantic understandings of childhood post Freud. As Steven Bruhm suggests, while Romantic ideals about childhood continue to hold sway in contemporary culture, 'we live in a culture haunted by Freud, for whom the child is always defined by conflicts, desires, and aggressions, instinctual drives he located in the human beings' animalistic “id”' (2006, 99). Working through the tensions intrinsic to Freudian equations of childhood with the adult unconscious, these 1980s films are gripped by anxieties about the indissoluble but impenetrable links between the psychic states of childhood and adulthood, and the ways that this construct burdens the child with the weight of the adult's past.

Uncanny child films subsequently displace the dichotomy between Calvinist and Romantic ideologies outlined by Schober. Rather than upholding an uncertainty as to whether the child is born into sin or innocence, these films problematize Romanticized childish ‘emptiness’: namely innocence and its external signifier, cuteness. As Lori Merish (1996) explains, cuteness is itself a mark of otherness, and the lines between cute and uncanny can be particularly blurry when considering the child. She points out that
as a strategy for managing the radical Otherness of the child, cuteness is [...] intimately bound up with the history of the ‘freak’. There are obvious parallels between child and freak: both are liminal figures, residing on the boundaries that separate the ‘fully human’ from the ‘less-than-human.’ (1996, 189)

In uncanny child films, the semantics that typically portray the child’s cuteness and naivety – in particular, illegible or imperfect attempts at communication – become coded as threatening in their very signification of the shadowy borderlands between childhood and adulthood, implicated in the Freud-inflected model whereby childhood is associated with urgent but intangible psychic pasts and secrets.

In these films, cuteness thus morphs into threatening inscrutability, so that the child comes to precisely embody the uncanny process whereby the ‘heimlich [...] becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym unheimlich’ (Freud, 2003b, 134). Thus, while Schober suggests that ‘one advantage of the possession motif is that it casts the child as both good and evil, innocent and corrupt, victim and villain’ (2004, 16), it is in the very nature of their simultaneous reflections of and disruptions to adult protagonists that uncanny child figures of the early 1980s seem at once familiar and unfamiliar, vulnerable and threatening, innocent and dangerously indecipherable. The child is no longer a possessed innocent – in which the category of innocence itself remains intact and unchallenged – but is either a ghost or a conduit between normality and an abject spectral realm, in turn becoming a symptom of or privileged witness to ghastly secrets of the past. Through evoking ‘something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed’ (Freud, 2003b, 148), childhood in these films is constructed as the receptacle for the repressed content constitutive of adult complexes, leading the uncanny child to become disruptive to linear narrative progression and symbolic coherence in ways that aestheticize the child character’s threat to the adult protagonist’s psyche.

Because of the child’s symbolic position as an element of the adult protagonist’s psyche that is at once entirely familiar yet is also inevitably ungraspable, the child, culturally defined as other to the adult through a comparative lack of knowledge and understanding, comes to expose uncanny insights beyond conventional adult rationality. Thus, the uncanny child’s association with repressed secrets raises an anxiety espoused by Derrida in his discussion of the secret: ‘How can another see into me, into my most secret self, without my being able to see in there myself and without my being
able to see him in me?’ (1996, 92). In symbolic parallel to a psychoanalytic journey into the depths of the unconscious, adult protagonists and viewers undergo a process of deciphering and interpreting to ‘unlock’ what the child conceals; thus, the secrets that the child bears radiate an enigmatic force that propels the narrative, underscoring critical turning points and moments of horror.

The 1980s and the Rise of the Uncanny Child

It is significant that the uncanny child surfaces as a key horror trope in the early 1980s, a decade in which distinct fissures in America’s ideological fabric developed. At the cusp of the new decade, president Jimmy Carter was forced to respond to wavering sociocultural stability – the effect of an amalgamation of ongoing tribulations such as an energy crisis, stagflation, and turbulent international relations – with a speech in 1979 that acknowledged the malaise, stating:

The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our Nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America. (Carter, 2006, 356)

The uncanny child characters of The Shining, The Changeling, and Poltergeist are themselves ambiguous threats to the security of meaning and the unity of subjectivity, and can thus be seen as bound to this nebulous anxiety about the wavering of ideological certainty during this period. Carter’s suggestion that an erosion of confidence in futurity exists at the core of these vague tensions signals the child’s implication in this sense of decline. Subsequently, the 1980s saw a series of significant social shifts that circulated around the child.

The sociocultural conditions of the 1980s encouraged a more intense consideration of what childhood represents, perhaps partly in an effort to

2 Some films in the 1970s contain similar visions of the child which foreshadow the constructions of uncanny childhood that erupted in the early 1980s. These include The Other (Robert Mulligan, 1972) and Audrey Rose (Robert Wise, 1977); in both cases, the children are depicted as possessed, but they are in fact possessed by other child characters – a dead twin in The Other and the earlier incarnation of a reincarnated child in Audrey Rose – indicating their straining against the possession motif.
regain a clear vision of the future. In the words of Sarah Harwood, it was a decade ‘which based its reactionary political agenda on “family values”’ (1997, 2) as the family ‘annealed the gap between social crisis and political mythology’ (1997, 15). In more self-aware and overt ways in the 1980s than in prior decades, the child became the primary justification for the family’s continued ideological and sociocultural centrality. Ironically, in a decade in which both the Reagan and Thatcher governments were strongly invested in familial ideology – positioning the family as a static, idealized unit that functions as an individuated microcosm of society – the perceived strength and social dominance of the heteronormative nuclear family unit was disintegrating due to rising divorce rates, increasing numbers of LGBT parents seeking custody of their children or otherwise forming families (Fitzgerald, 1999, 56-8; 66), rapid increases in women’s economic independence, and resultant widespread changes in family demographics. As Frances Litman suggests in an article published in 1980, ‘in the United States today, a preoccupation with the changing American family is so widespread that it has become almost a national obsession’ (1). The traditional, lifelong union between husband and wife could no longer be seen as the stable core of the nuclear family. In this context, the child becomes invested with a particularly important yet threatening power, figured as the thread that sutures the family together but which could also at any moment unravel it completely. Harwood points out that ‘power balances, traditionally weighted towards the father, now tipped towards the child, and the most heated debates in the 1980s revolved around the rights of the latter’ (1997, 51), debates which culminated in the first United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989.

In addition to the child’s increasingly ideologically charged position in unifying the politically pivotal but ever more precarious family unit in the early 1980s was the child’s newfound clout as a consumer. Stephen Kline (1995), Dominic Lennard (2015), and Juliet B. Shor (2004) have each pointed out that the 1980s marked the beginning of a boom in children’s consumer culture that saw the rapid rise in marketing aimed directly at children. In his study of the history of children’s culture, Kline positions the 1980s as a key turning point in understandings of childhood. As he suggests, ‘during the 1980s a major transformation took place in children’s [television]
scheduling thanks to the interest of toy merchandisers’ (1995, 140). He elucidates that ‘the removal of long-established restrictions on advertising realism and tie-ins during the 1980s allowed marketers to explore new ways of communicating with children’ (1995, 237). As Lennard points out, these shifts meant that ‘throughout the 1980s, understandings of childhood were increasingly mediated by advertising and consumer culture’ (2015, 137) as ‘the specific targeting of their desires positioned the child as an active force in consumption’ (2015, 136). Lennard argues that these new conditions can be seen as a driving influence behind the anxieties expressed in monstrous living-doll film CHILD’S PLAY (Tom Holland, 1988), which positions the child’s economic bargaining power within the fractured family unit as a terrifying threat.

Thus, the sense that the child was becoming empowered in new ways – particularly at the expense, both literally and figuratively, of the patriarchal head of the traditional household – permeated American culture of the 1980s. The anxious awareness that the child had gained more social agency while also being tasked with unifying the family just as this politically vital institution seemed to be dissolving amplifies the Freud-inflected anxieties in THE SHINING, THE CHANGELING, and POLTERGEIST. In these films, the child disrupts the patriarch’s power in both psychic and external terms, in ways that unsettle the coherence of his identity and suggest the breakdown of long-entrenched ideological structures.

‘Kids Can Scare You to Death’: THE SHINING

THE SHINING, an adaptation of Stephen King’s eponymous 1977 novel, has been extensively analysed and deconstructed. In particular, a number of precise psychoanalytic readings of the film have been produced, partly because Kubrick and his cowriter Diane Johnson are known to have studied Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’ and Bruno Bettelheim’s The Uses of Enchantment (1976) while developing the screenplay (Hoile, 1984, 5). Yet these studies have not suggested how, in self-consciously playing with psychoanalytic stories about childhood development, THE SHINING marks a shift in horror film visions of monstrous children by directly confronting childhood’s ambivalent otherness. Furthermore, to date, almost all of these critical studies unequivocally position the child Danny as the innocent, helpless

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victim of his father Jack’s monstrosity, not appreciating the extent to which Danny himself is the embodiment of the uncanny throughout the film. Danny’s ambiguously threatening configuration and his associations with his father’s trauma underline his resistance to the vacillation between evil and innocence that structured previous possessed and evil child figures. Subsequently this character has had a vast influence upon post-1980s constructions of horror film children.

Notably, in his historicist reading of the film, Fredric Jameson also suggests that Danny functions as a ‘play with generic signals’ (1992, 88), noting that ‘we’ve had enough experience with horrible children (LeRoy’s The Bad Seed [1956], Rilla’s The Village of the Damned [1961]) to be able to identify sheer evil when someone rubs our noses in it’ (emphasis in original, 1992, 88). He suggests that audiences are invited to misread the film’s genre during its first half-hour (1992, 89) as it gradually becomes clear that it is not an evil child film but refracts a ‘specific and articulated historical commentary’ (1992, 90) through what Jameson categorizes as a traditional ghost story centred on Jack. While I concur that the audience is intentionally misled via Danny’s early characterization, I suggest that this does not set up a shift in focus away from the child – who remains central to the narrative – but self-reflexively comments on his textual function.

There are a number of visual echoes of prominent contemporary child-centred horror films throughout The Shining, particularly of The Omen released four years prior. Danny is often seen standing in the same hands in pockets, head cocked to the side stance that has become iconic of devil-child Damien, exhibited in the final scene of The Omen and also featured in the film’s promotional posters. Furthermore, in one particularly lengthy and now iconic scene, Danny replicates Damien’s riding on a tricycle around the hallways of the Thorn household (Fig. 1), which, in The Omen, is a similarly drawn-out sequence that concludes with Damien pushing his mother from the house’s internal balcony. Most clearly of all, Danny is introduced through his communion with ‘Tony’, a mysterious invisible friend. Danny’s conversations with Tony echo Regan’s communication with the invisible ‘Mr. Howdy’ in The Exorcist, which prefigures her possession by the devil.

While these connections to Damien and Regan underscore the vague sense of threat exuded by Danny’s character, they function as a false lead. Kubrick establishes these links quite early in the film before recontextualizing them to reinforce that Danny pivots on a different conceptual axis to these possessed and evil children: Tony represents not an evil force

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5 A notable exception to this tendency is Dustin Freeley’s (2015) book chapter on the film.
external to the child, but a doubling of the child himself; Danny’s tricycle riding does not result in the murder of either of his parents, but merely depicts his childish means of passing the time within the vast, isolated hotel to which his family have moved. By establishing and then discarding these connections to earlier evil child films, Kubrick emphasizes the manner by which the film delves beyond the shallow tension established between the child as innocent empty vessel and the evil demon that lurks within. In The Omen, a priest remarks of Damien ‘This is not a human child’, thus denying that the frightening or inscrutable qualities of the child character are anything to do with the nature of childhood itself. By contrast, in the opening of The Shining, a doctor examines Danny.
after he has fallen into a catatonic state, and says ‘Kids can scare you to death’: a symbolic foreshadowing of the child’s own threatening ideological status and supernatural powers, and the way they eventually result in the annihilation of Danny’s father, Jack.

**The Psychic Entanglement of Danny and Jack**

Expressing prevalent cultural anxieties about the shifting status of the nuclear family in the 1980s, *The Shining* plays out a dramatic breakdown of the family unit: Danny, his mother Wendy, and Jack. At the beginning of the film, the Torrance family move to the isolated Overlook Hotel, where writer Jack has acquired an off-season job as a caretaker. The film circulates around the traumas of the family’s past while never clearly articulating the nature of these events, except for the suggestion that Jack is a former alcoholic who has abused his son in the past, dislocating his shoulder. Jack hopes to restore the unity of his family at the isolated hotel in tandem with regaining a stable sense of his own identity by displacing the traumas of the past and resecuring his position as economically, emotionally, and mentally dominant patriarch. Yet Danny, who is able to perceive ghosts from both the past and future within the walls of the hotel, continually works against his father’s attempts to restore symbolic coherence.

Through his supernatural ‘shining’ power, Danny unleashes the ghostly spectres of both his father’s unconscious and the hotel’s grisly past in ways that are inextricably entwined. Overarching the film’s enigmatic narrative is Jack’s belated cognizance that he shares the murderous rage and violent impulses of the previous caretaker of the hotel, Grady, who murdered his wife and twin daughters in the hotel. The paralleling of Jack and Grady takes on vague connotations as a repressed trauma within Jack’s own past, as it is suggested at a number of points in the film that Grady and Jack may be one and the same. The film is not interested in clarifying a binary between the external reality of these events and their existence as the darkest impulses of Jack’s mind. Instead, the hotel psycho-topographically maps out the labyrinthine corridors of both Jack’s and his son’s psyches, as Danny’s power plunges his father (and the viewer) into the asynchronous realm of the unconscious. This is a space in which, to reiterate Stockton, ‘past and present ego-structures [exist] side-by-side, almost cubistically, in lateral spread’ (2009, 14), with Danny being the crucible for Jack’s submerged memories, thoughts, desires, and fears. Thus, Danny’s supernatural powers function to empower the site of the adult’s unconscious, facilitating the monstrous eruption of his father’s own repressed drives and traumas.
As a result of Danny's power, the entire film is shot through with the aesthetics of trauma: barely explicable events double and repeat, haunting both Jack and Danny and blurring the boundaries between their psychic realms. For instance, at one point Danny finally wanders into Room 237, a space which the psychic hotel cook, Halloran, had previously declared off-limits. While the film elides what occurs within the room, Danny emerges in a trancelike state, with bruises covering his neck, and later tells his mother (in a moment the viewer does not see) that a crazy old woman tried to strangle him there. It is notable that Danny appears before his parents in this state just as Jack is telling Wendy about a terrible dream from which he has just awoken, in which he slaughtered his wife and child. When Jack ventures to the room ostensibly to determine the source of his child's injuries and fears, the scene is at first filmed from a first-person perspective that suggests we are witnessing Danny's memories of the events that took place there, rather than sharing Jack's perspective in the film's present. This is implied by a shot of the door at the start of the sequence, which appears almost identical to the shot of the door that preceded Danny's own entrance into the room about fifteen minutes prior: it is filmed from the same low angle indicative of the child's perspective, and the door is also ajar at precisely the same angle. Furthermore, a close-up of Danny's terrified face directly follows this shot of the door. The scene subsequently plays out in first-person perspective, until a reverse medium shot reveals that it is in fact Jack's perspective that we now share: the point at which Danny's memories were replaced with Jack's present perspective remains unclear, and it is suggested throughout this sequence that the two are impossible to disentangle.

When Jack enters Room 237, he at first encounters a beautiful naked woman in the bathtub, who he embraces, only to glance in the mirror behind the woman to realize that she now appears as an old crone with flesh decaying from her bones. Jack backs away from the decomposing woman as she cackles and slowly advances towards him. These shots depicting the woman's slow but relentless pursuit of Jack with outstretched arms are intercut not only with Jack's frightened expression, but with more close-up shots of Danny's terrified face, as well as shots showing the old woman appearing as a corpse in the bathtub, slowly rising from the mouldering water. The scene thus establishes a jumbled intermingling of Jack and Danny's traumas, as Jack's own vision of the decaying woman is knotted with Danny's fractured traumatic remembrance of his previous encounter with her.

The elusive mysteries of Room 237 are often seen as the core of the film's enigmas, to the point that a documentary about the film's cult following and the many wild theories which purport to interpret it was titled Room 237 (Rodney Ascher, 2012).
The psychic entanglement of Danny and Jack is further suggested by Tony, the child’s invisible friend. In the Stephen King novel on which the film is based, it is revealed that ‘Tony’ is actually a future version of Danny. A temporality-bending double of both Jack and Danny par excellence; at this revelation, it is ‘as if Tony – as if the Daniel Anthony Torrance that would someday be – was a Halfling caught between father and son, a ghost of both, a fusion’ (King, 1977, 321). While Kubrick does not explicitly reinforce this connection on the level of dialogue – and it is the nature of the film, suffused with the irrationality and temporal dissonance of trauma, that very little is overtly explained – the Danny-Tony dyad also symbolically serves this function in Kubrick’s film adaptation. The entwinement of Danny, Tony, and Jack incarnates a nexus of psychic identifications between father and son: the child simultaneously represents his father’s other, his father’s ungraspable deepest psychic realms and pasts, and the future that lies beyond the threshold of his father’s death. Danny’s shining power and communion with Tony unleash the repressed pasts, impulses, and conflicted desires that erode Jack’s hold on his self-identity, as the child becomes embroiled with the obscure depths of Jack’s psyche.

The child thus defaces clearly demarcated identities in an abject disturbance of symbolic orderliness, embodying ‘the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (Kristeva, 1982, 4) that exists at the core of Julia Kristeva’s definition of abjection, the traumatic ‘place where meaning collapses’ (1982, 2). By disturbing the secure boundaries of Jack’s singular selfhood, the child precisely functions as the ‘inescapable boomerang’ of abjection Kristeva describes, ‘a vortex of summons and repulsion [which] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself’ (1982, 1). Unable to escape from his son within the walls of the hotel and thus forced to face the repressed psychic content that Danny both exposes and elides, ‘Jack’ eventually disperses into a polymorphous composite of spectres representative of his previously submerged rage, desires, and traumas: by the end of the film, Jack himself is indistinguishable from the ghost of Grady, the former caretaker of the hotel who murdered his wife and children and ‘has always been’ at the hotel. This point is reinforced by the film’s infamous final image, which depicts Jack in the centre of a black-and-white photograph depicting the Hotel’s 1921 July 4th Ball.

Thus, while the Overlook Hotel is ostensibly positioned as the site of ghostly hauntings in THE SHINING, Danny is the vessel through which this abject realm emerges. We first become privy to the enigmatic spectral world of the hotel via Danny’s perspective, yet this occurs before Wendy and Danny have even ventured to the hotel. Through a parallel-edited opening
sequence, the psychic links between Jack and his son are established as Danny has visions of the hotel while his father undergoes an interview for the caretaker position. This sequence is introduced via a slow dissolve that momentarily overlays an image of Jack and his son. While Jack is introduced to the hotel in the course of his interview, Danny talks to Tony while looking in the mirror, in which he witnesses his first vision of the terrifying Overlook.

In this scene, we are confronted with an uncanny inversion of the Lacanian mirror stage, in which the child (mis)recognizes himself as a unified, coherent being while looking at his reflection, a process that Lacan sees as underlying the psychic constitution of one's singular self-identity. Instead of depicting the wholeness of Danny's identity, this scene moves towards the opposite vector, as the communion between Danny and his mirror image exposes him as a fragmented and splintered being even though he initially appears to us as a unified entity. Not only does the mirror serve as an intermediary between Danny and Tony, but, because this scene is parallel-edited with Jack's first encounter with the hotel, this mirrored doubling introduces Danny's own psychic imbrication with Jack. The viewer also becomes implicated in this undermining of subjective wholeness through a confrontation with the mirror, as the camera slowly tracks from an image of Danny standing before it to a shot of the mirror image itself, so that the mirror comes to fill the entire screen: the 'real' child becomes replaced with his mirror image and the viewer is placed into his position instead. However, the camera does not approach the mirror front-on, so that, although we are looking at the child's reflection, he does not meet our gaze, functioning as an imperfect reflection of the viewer that remains detached and not fully graspable.

Danny's mirror image thus evokes a subtle wavering of the permeable borders between the child character and the audience which parallels that between the child and adult protagonist, aestheticizing the child's function as the adult's own specular but ultimately disconnected self (Fig. 2). It is this uncomfortably familiar yet imperfect doubling – powerfully condensed in The Shining by the repeated images of the ghostly and (not quite) identical Grady twins – that underscores the uncanny child's relationship with Jack, as the father's singular identity collapses through his simultaneous entwinement with and distance from his son. While looking in the mirror, Danny first witnesses his (now iconic) recurring visions of the river of blood flowing from the hotel's elevator and the eerie Grady twins. Thus, Danny's character is introduced via his facilitation of the 'doubled, divided and interchanged' (Freud, 2003b, 141) self at the core of the uncanny – a
preoccupation Freud sees expressed in *doppelgänger* and telepathy motifs, both of which are central to Danny’s characterization. This introduction to Danny exposes how the eerie spectres of the Overlook – and Jack’s own mind – are rooted in the psychic realm of the child, and in fact King’s novel further elucidates this link: ‘In the Overlook all things had a sort of life. It was as if the whole place had been wound up with a silver key. […] [Danny] was that key’ (King, 1977, 234-235).

**Danny’s Abject Hieroglyphs**

As this key example shows, throughout the film, Danny’s visions are expressed through obscure symbols that simultaneously prefigure and obscure the secrets underlying the Overlook Hotel's ghosts and his father's descent into madness. Thus, Danny emits vital narrative clues that are not articulated coherently in adult terms, but which exist at the core of the film’s diegetic world and his father’s psyche, positioning the child at the symbolic centre of the film. The subsequent narrative impulse to decipher the child’s visions and his attempts at communicating them to his parents echoes the quest to uncover the hidden source of Little Hans’s phobia in Freud’s ‘Analysis of a Phobia in a Five Year Old Boy.’ In Freud’s case study, Little Hans’s vaguely expressed fear of horses is excavated by both Freud and Hans’s own father in an attempt to resolve the enigmas of the child’s language. By treating the child’s communication as though it were a string of riddles to be solved, Freud seeks to unlock the secrets surrounding the repressed pasts and components of the *adult* psyche: the Oedipal complex.
and related stages in Freud’s model of psychosexual development. As Freud explains:

When a physician treats an adult neurotic by psycho-analysis, the process he goes through of uncovering the psychical formations, layer by layer, eventually enables him to frame certain hypotheses as to the patient’s infantile sexuality; and it is in the components of the latter that he believes he has discovered the motive forces of all the neurotic symptoms of later life. [...] But even a psycho-analyst may confess to the wish for a more direct and less roundabout proof of these fundamental theorems. Surely there must be a possibility of observing in children at first hand and in all the freshness of life the sexual impulses and wishes which we dig out so laboriously in adults from among their own debris – especially as it is also our belief that they are the common property of all men, a part of the human constitution, and merely exaggerated or distorted in the case of neurotics. (2001, 6)

Thus, the process of decoding Little Hans’s ‘riddles’ – his mysterious fear that a white horse might bite him, an obsession with horses and their ‘widdlers’, and his playing with dolls with knives protruding from their genitals7 – promises to reveal the inscrutable repressed content underlying adult complexes and neuroses. Freud positions Hans’s case as proof of his Oedipal model, interpreting the child’s phobia and fixations as a sign that he was working through a fear that his father would castrate him for desiring his mother. Various scholars post Freud, such as Barbara Creed (1993), Melanie Klein (1975), and Lacan (2001) have presented variations on Freud’s own analysis, each of them centred around careful interpretations of Hans’s childish communication – his barely intelligible speech, drawings, and play – to provide evidence of the intangible (and universal) inner workings of the adult unconscious.

THE SHINING and other post-1980 uncanny child films do not refract any specific such model of infantile sexual development, but instead dwell on this very process whereby the child’s insecure methods of communication are positioned as conundrums that both stand for and promise to resolve the deepest fissures of the adult’s mind and existence. In Kristeva’s discussion of Freud’s analysis, she points out that ‘the phobia of horses becomes a hieroglyph that condenses all fears, from unnameable to nameable. [...]”

7 Barbara Creed (1993) famously interprets this element of the Little Hans’s case as a sign of the child’s fear of the castrating vagina dentata.
The statement, “to be afraid of horses” is a hieroglyph having the logic of metaphor and hallucination’ (emphasis in original, 1982, 34). While Kristeva herself carries out an analysis of Hans’s case which purports to expose clues to the universal structure of the unconscious, what is significant to my consideration of the uncanny child is that she positions the child’s phobic object as inherently enigmatic, pushing at the limits of the adult’s symbolic order: hence her use of the term hieroglyph.

Danny, like Little Hans, expresses, or is in fact constituted of, hieroglyphs that dimly illumine the enigmas that the adult protagonists – and viewers – are tasked with deciphering. This narrative drive entails an attempt to excavate what is uncanny and unknowable about the child and reconfigure it into a more secure symbolic framework – in so doing, domesticating his threatening alterity and restoring coherence to both the adult protagonist’s existence and to the viewer’s sense of narrative meaning. In this context, the child’s comparatively insecure handle on language and processes of signification becomes a source of anxiety, being associated with dark secrets buried deep within the psychic realm of adulthood but just beyond the adult’s perceptual capabilities. Danny’s vision of the river of blood flowing from the hotel’s elevator early in the film represents the first of the hieroglyphs that the child issues, one that viewers are tasked with contextualizing into a lucid symbolic pattern in an attempt to unlock the meaning or purpose underlying the spectral presences of the Overlook. The image, repeated multiple times throughout the film, functions as a condensation of ‘nameable and unnameable’ anxieties surrounding the continuous cycles of patriarchal violence that underlie the hotel in a similar manner to Little Hans’s obscure fear of the white horse.

The other central hieroglyph in the film is Danny-Tony’s\(^8\) repetitive chanting of the nonsense word ‘REDRUM’, and his eventual scrawling of this word upon his mother’s bedroom door using her lipstick. In the process of deciphering this hieroglyph, the audience is aligned with Wendy as we are compelled to comprehend the child in order to fully recognize the murderous intentions of his father, Jack, which have so far been suggested but ultimately opaque to both Jack himself, his wife, and the audience. Wendy and the viewer share a moment of recognition as ‘REDRUM’ is reflected in the mirror to become ‘MURDER’, a meaning-securing counterpoint to the uncanny mirror-doubling of Danny seen early in the film. Like Danny’s recurring vision of the river of blood, ‘REDRUM’ esoterically promises to resolve the

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\(^8\) At this point in the film, the utterances of Danny and his invisible friend Tony meld, as Danny starts to speak only in the guttural register and repetitive phraseology of Tony.
mysteries of the narrative, again pointing to Jack’s violent impulses and to the hotel’s terrible past, yet ultimately resists further clarification like Little Hans’s hieroglyphic compounding of nameable and unnameable fears.

The visual construction of this hieroglyph positions it as an expression of the cuteness that delineates the borders of childhood; Danny’s drawing with red lipstick on the door evokes a stereotypical image of cute childhood mischief, and his ‘REDRUM’ exhibits the broad scrawl, incoherence, and backwards letters that stand as signals for the child’s charmingly insecure hold on language and writing. As Merish points out, ‘cuteness aestheticizes the most primary social distinctions, regulating the (shifting) boundaries between Selves and Others, cultural “insiders” and cultural “outsiders”, “humans” and “freaks”’ (1996, 188). Cuteness in this context becomes realized as an anxiety-laden signifier for the unstable partition between child and adult, as ‘REDRUM’ emphasizes the occluded channel of communication between Danny and Wendy/the viewer, while simultaneously projecting an awareness of Jack’s formerly repressed murderous rage and imminent violence.

Tony functions as a receptacle for the elusive secrets that all of these hieroglyphs simultaneously expose and conceal; he is, according to Danny ‘The little boy who lives in my mouth’, who remains ungraspable to the adult characters. When Danny is being examined by a doctor after first being confronted with the vision of the river of blood, she shines a torch into his eyes as if to illuminate the child’s dark corners. The doctor asks if she can have a look in Danny’s mouth to get a glimpse of Tony, but Danny assures her that she will not see him, because he has gone to hide in Danny’s ‘stomach’. The doctor’s interrogation of Danny ultimately meets a dead end, as Danny abruptly halts the questioning with ‘I don’t want to talk about Tony anymore.’ Tony thus functions as a crystallization of the inscrutable secrets that impel adult characters and viewers towards the child in their quest to understand the vaguely expressed anxieties that throb throughout the film. This constitution is further suggested by the fact that, while facilitating Danny’s insight into the repressed pasts of both the hotel and his father’s psyche, Tony also represents the future adult latent within Danny. Thus, the Danny-Tony dyad reinforces the overarching implications in THE SHINING that the traumas of childhood – vaguely entangled with the adult protagonist’s own dark pasts – can be assembled into coherent meaning only in the ‘future tense’ of adulthood. Overall, the film presents a vision of childhood that is disturbing not because the child is possessed or evil – as is emphasized by the true nature of Danny’s ‘invisible friend’ – but because the child is impossibly intertwined with yet simultaneously impenetrable to the adult’s psyche.
'Why do you Remain?': Traumatic Repetition in *The Changeling*

Released two months prior to *The Shining*, *The Changeling* presents a different syntactic category of uncanny child to Danny, the living child who is capable of perceiving both ghosts and the darkest reaches of his father's mind. Instead, *The Changeling*’s uncanny child, Joseph, is himself a ghost. Yet, despite this key difference, Joseph exposes similar anxieties about the paradoxes inherent in the child’s position as both a victimized innocent external to the adult protagonist and as a threatening symbol of the adult’s past trauma and inner psychic tensions. In this film, this role is underscored by the fact that Joseph is a poltergeist, a contradictory non-presence who affects the present in a violent manner despite being a spectral remnant of a displaced past. In *The Changeling*, Joseph’s status as a poltergeist drives the uncanny child’s conflation with the (re)emergence of repressed pasts with particularly tangled relationships with the adult’s own psyche.

In the film, ghost-child Joseph is concealed within a secret attic of the mansion in Seattle in which protagonist John, a composer, has come to live. The opening of the film depicts the sudden death of John’s wife and child in a traffic accident: while John is inside a phone booth calling roadside assistance to fix the family’s car, a truck strikes both his wife and daughter. The vision of their sudden deaths is omitted – the viewer only sees John’s horrified reaction from within the phone booth, powerless to prevent the accident, as he bangs against the glass. This moment haunts John – and the film as a whole – in an aestheticization of traumatic experience not fully grasped in the first instance, exposing the extent to which, to use Caruth’s description, ‘trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on’ (1996, 4). John moves to the isolated mansion while grieving the death of his family, in an attempt to restart his life and recover from his trauma. Yet the ghost Joseph performs a symbolic repetition of John’s trauma, and it is through this mechanism that the child-ghost and the secrets he bears expose a symbolic fissure within both the adult protagonist’s psyche and the diegetic real.

Joseph, a crippled, sickly child while alive, was drowned in the bathtub by his wealthy father Richard, who feared that the child would die before his 21st birthday and would thus fail to retain the vast family fortune – inherited from his mother – within the family. Richard subsequently covered up the child’s death and replaced Joseph with a healthy orphan. As a ghost, Joseph endlessly enacts a repetition of the scene of his death, which in turn functions...
as an expression of John's own compulsion to repeat the trauma that haunts him. For John, Joseph (dis)embodies the Freudian conception of traumatic neuroses in which the dream life ‘continually takes the patient back to the situation of his disaster, from which he awakens in renewed terror’ (Freud, 1922, 9). Joseph's presence is first made known to John through a recurring booming that carries throughout the house at 6:00 every morning, abruptly waking him from sleep – notably, in one scene John awakes in tears as the booming emerges.

John will not accept that this sound is, as the gardener explains, a problem with the old house's furnace, responding that it is ‘too loud, too rhythmic’: it represents an insistent hammering upon John's own consciousness. The sound is similar to the cannon-like booming that haunts Eleanor in The Haunting (Robert Wise, 1963), a sound that expresses Eleanor's ambivalent feelings towards her dead mother by monstrously inflating the sickly woman's late night banging on her bedroom door, while simultaneously evoking the rage of the ghostly spirits of Hill House. In The Changeling, the overwhelming banging stages an uncanny repetition that disturbs coherent boundaries of selfhood between John and the child-ghost. The booming relays in magnified form both Joseph's desperate banging on the sides of the bathtub as his father drowned him, and John's own frantic beating on the door of the telephone booth as he helplessly watched his wife and child get hit by a truck. The inextricable connection between the two is further suggested when John finally locates the locked door that conceals the attic within which Joseph's ghost lingers: as John starts to beat on the lock with a hammer, the spectral booming reemerges in time with his own banging. John's forcing his way into this hidden space simultaneously represents a restaging of his own trauma and an attempt to conquer and excavate the secrets of the uncanny child. Further reinforcing his entwinement with John's trauma, Joseph functions like a blockage to John's creative development and advancement throughout the film, continually drawing him back to the past in an uncanny loop. Midway through the film, John is depicted composing a new piece, as the stages of composition are shown in abbreviated form and he proudly records the finished product. This lengthy sequence suggests that John has started to work through the traumas of his family's death, and is regaining stability as he rebuilds his identity post trauma. Later in the film, however, in a moment of déjà vu in the hidden attic, John discovers Joseph's rusted old music box, which plays the very melody he has recently 'composed' – as he remarks in disbelief, 'same key, same tempo'. It is later revealed that this song played on Joseph's music box when his father viciously drowned him; thus, John's composition represents another symbolic instance of an unconscious compulsion to repeat, driven
by the ghost. To reinforce this, John plays the two pieces simultaneously in an eerie convergence of past and present; at this point, *déjà vu* actualizes the vague threats to the linear progression of time incited by the ghost’s hauntings. As Nicholas Royle explains, there can perhaps be no conception of the uncanny without the impression of *déjà vu*, as ‘*Déjà vu* is the experience of the double *par excellence*: it is the experience of experience as double’ (2003, 183).

More than this, the experiential doubling of *déjà vu* constitutes a *temporal* layering, as time seems not to flow forwards in a homogenous, singular line, but instead suddenly appears to be comprised of strata of pastness that coexist with the present, raising the uncanny child's aestheticization of layers of temporality in the manner of Freud’s imagined Rome cited in the introduction to this chapter. Echoing the mirror scene from *The Shining* in audio-centric form, this scene also captures Joseph's eerie entwinement with and impassable distance from John's own psyche: in his layered restaging of traumatic pasts, the child-ghost simultaneously enforces a nonlinear experience of time and a wavering of borders between the adult self and the child other. John is bewildered by the emergence of his composition on the old music box, explaining that ‘whatever it is, it's trying desperately to communicate’. Thus, the child's mysteriously inarticulate attempts to communicate are again foregrounded, uncanny because they simultaneously emerge from within the adult's own consciousness and from some unknowable realm beyond the adult's perceptual grasp.

Ultimately, Joseph's invasion of John's psyche functions as a compulsion to repeat a past trauma in an effort to gain mastery over it at the interface of both of their subjectivities. By haunting John with the traumas of his death, Joseph impels John to locate his corporeal remains (hidden in the depths of a well that was built over long ago), and expose his father's crime. In so doing, Joseph leads John to dislodge the replacement ‘Joseph' from his prominent position as a wealthy Senator by revealing him to be a 'changeling'. Thus, Joseph's compulsion to repeat works towards mastery via revenge, a trait Freud associates with the child's consciousness (and thus the adult's *unconsciousness*) when he explains traumatic neurosis via the example of child's play. In his famous example of the *fort-da* (gone-there) game, in which a child repeatedly throws toys from his crib only to have his guardian return them, Freud suggests that children play in a manner that repeats disagreeable experiences in order to gain mastery over these unpleasant feelings. For Freud, the *fort-da* game represents an empowered restaging of the child's experience of his mother leaving him alone in his crib only to have her return later, a situation over which the child has no power. Furthermore, Freud suggests that the child's compulsion to repeat during play also works to fulfil
'the gratification of an impulse of revenge' as ‘in passing from the passivity of experience to the activity of play the child applies to his playfellow the unpleasant occurrence that befell himself and so avenges himself on the person of this proxy’ (1922, 14-16). Thus, the compulsion to repeat via child's play replays the conditions of the child's discomfort, yet places the child in an active position so that he can at once claim a sense of vengeance for his pain, while regaining power in a situation that previously left him helpless. Joseph's ghost works in this manner, as, through his repetition of trauma, he intends to empower himself, reanimating the conditions of his death in an effort to make himself heard and also to become a source of fear. Furthermore, through his hauntings, Joseph seeks vengeance upon his changeling, even though the Senator had no hand in or even knowledge of the child's death. Joseph even first makes himself known to John via a spectral version of the fort-da game: he throws a red ball down the stairs, which John picks up and subsequently throws into a nearby river. Yet, when John returns home, the soaking wet ball once again bounces down the stairs.9

Notably, this ball belonged to John's daughter, and John had previously kept it in a box with some of his daughter's other prized possessions. Joseph's eerie game of fort-da thus indicates the extent to which John himself works in simultaneity with Joseph's spectral compulsion to repeat, by questing to resolve the traumas of the ghost-child where his own trauma cannot be resolved. This connection is reinforced by the fact that John at first assumes that Joseph is the ghost of his daughter, before instead assuming, after perusing some historical records, that the ghost is that of a young girl who was struck and killed by a coal cart – a spectral proxy for his daughter. By becoming embroiled in Joseph's own compulsion to repeat, John too seeks to gain mastery over his trauma by exposing the mysteries surrounding the ghost's death and seeking vengeance for it, thus acquiring an agency not possible in response to the sudden death of his own family.

**Time Out of Joint: Shining Cultural Traumas**

Both *The Shining* and *The Changeling* illustrate the extent to which the uncanny child is implicated with the traumas and related repressed content of the adult protagonist's psyche. These films represent a shift in constructions of horror film children, and would go on to influence the

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9 Famously, *The Shining* also has an incarnation of this eerie ball game. The Grady twins first reveal themselves to Danny by rolling a yellow ball down the hallway.
films discussed in the proceeding chapter: both films can ultimately be seen as master texts that reverberate within many subsequent uncanny child films. While primary to these films is the uncanny child's entanglement with the adult character's interior psychic turmoil, a related condition of this process which comes to be amplified in late 1990s and early 2000s horror cinema – particularly from Spain and Japan – is how this mechanism enmeshes the uncanny child with sociocultural traumas suppressed in present adult society.

While Danny's shining power enforces a collapse in psychic boundaries between himself and his father – and the eventual complete dissolution of his father's singular identity – the child's uncanny disturbances to temporal and symbolic coherence also afford him the ability to raise historical traumas repressed beneath the grandeur and opulence of the aptly named Overlook Hotel: he thus disturbs not only the security of his father's identity but that of America's cultural identity as well. This suggests a constructive empowerment of the child's uncanny otherness and its resistance to the rational strictures of adult discourse, beyond the negatively defined Freudian model in which the resurfacing of past traumas can be seen only through the narrow optique of adult neurosis – specifically the repetition compulsion – which must be resolved and overcome via the process of working through.

Danny's ability to re-invoke the repressed secrets of the past – to see beyond the romanticized nostalgia for the 1920s that overcomes Jack in the hotel's 'Gold Room' – implicates him in the disintegration of linear historical narratives. That the film ends at a juncture in which the relations between the past, present, and future remain in flux lays bare the uncanny child's subversive power in layering past and present ego-structures (to return to Stockton's terms), a conceptual transgression that can be productively elucidated through Deleuzian concepts of cinematic time.

Deleuze's discussion of the time-image, in which 'we are plunged into time rather than crossing space' (1997a, xii), serves to lend shape and purpose to this disturbing breakdown in linear time and the coherent chain of signification at the film's end. The SHINING provides an example of how the uncanny child raises a time that is 'out of joint': temporality becomes so tangled that, in the final scene, Jack exists as both a dead body sitting frozen on the hotel's grounds, and as a smiling face that 'has always been' in the 1920s-era black-and-white photograph on the hotel walls.

Danny's shining ultimately, to use Deleuze's description of the time-image, 'goes beyond the purely empirical succession of time' to reveal the 'coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration: a single event can belong to several levels: the sheets of past coexist in a non-chronological
order’ (1997a, xii). As Anna Powell suggests of the film, ‘[i]n the Overlook, space-time’s forward progression is meaningless. The viewer’s own sense of time is likewise caught in the confusing knot of a temporal maze’ (2006, 47). By the climax of the film, homogenous, linear temporality has collapsed as different layers of the hotel’s monstrous past become visible and are overlaid: skeletons covered in cobwebs are seen in the ballroom in addition to a crowd of people dressed in 1920s-era finery, and a man in a dog suit performs fellatio on a businessman in one of the hotel rooms. Furthermore, a distant chanting that vacillates between the diegetic and non-diegetic soundtrack raises the presence of the Native Americans violently oppressed in the construction of the Overlook. Early in the film, a throwaway comment made by hotel manager about the need to ‘[repel] Indian attacks’ while the hotel was being built vaguely gestures to the long-suppressed past of cultural genocide upon which the hotel is built. This violent past is activated via Danny’s shining power as a certain layer of the past, one of the many to coexist with the present at the ending of the film.

Furthermore, in The Changeling, the resurfacing of the repressed traumas of Joseph’s death are bound to a previously unacknowledged atrocity obscured by narratives detailing Seattle’s history: while John scrupulously studies historical texts in his attempt to gain knowledge surrounding the circumstances of the child’s death, Joseph’s murder and his subsequent replacement by another child – the current Senator – are elided in these official, adult-sanctioned narratives. Like Danny, by restaging a past trauma, Joseph unsettles linear constructions of history altogether, exposing a different layer of past coexistent with the present that is not contained within accepted historical discourse. Even after John has uncovered all the secrets of Joseph’s death and confronted the Senator with the truth of his past, Joseph does not contentedly ‘disappear’, restoring clear boundaries between past and present and the onwards progression of linear time. Instead, Joseph turns into a truly monstrous poltergeist, creating a fire in the house and threatening to kill all that enter it, leading John to cry out in desperation ‘Goddam son of a bitch, what is it you want? What do you want from me? I’ve done everything I can do! There’s nothing more to do!’ Like The Shining, The Changeling thus suggests an empowerment of traumatic experience that resists the adult-centric process of working through, resolution, and displacement.

Bill Blakemore (1987) has influentially argued that the repressed cultural guilt surrounding the genocide of Native Americans is a central element of the film.
that characterizes both psychoanalytic approaches to traumatic ‘neuroses’ and traditional ghost narrative trajectories. Thus, the child’s harnessing of trauma exposes the constructedness of adult-sanctioned chronological and historical time, and ultimately refuses to be re-synchronized according to a narrow temporal model that prioritizes the present existence of the adult protagonist and that in turn domesticates the subversive alterity of the child.

Another film that can be seen as part of this early 1980s uncanny child cycle is Poltergeist (Tobe Hooper, 1982). Like The Shining and The Changeling, Poltergeist positions an uncanny child as the agent through which repressed traumas surface, as little Carol Anne is at first the only member of the Freeling family to perceive the ‘TV people’ – ghosts who communicate through the television – before eventually being sucked into their realm. However, because Poltergeist centres on a female child, the emphasis is somewhat different: she does not become embroiled in the same manner with the darkest remnants of the male protagonist’s psyche, for she is not positioned as a troublingly imperfect reflection of this patriarchal figure. Instead, her entwinement with the spectres that haunt her family raises the darkest content of all the characters’ minds, as the ghosts enact what most scares each of the characters in an amplified literalization of the processes veiled in the earlier films. In so doing, Carol Anne threatens the utter dissolution of secure and stable adult identities, as is crystallized in the scene in which one of the paranormal investigators hired to cleanse the family home of spirits looks at his reflection in the mirror only for his facial features to disintegrate rapidly before his eyes (Fig. 3).

The child’s eerie commune with the ghosts also works to implode the traditional sanctity and unity of the nuclear family, upon which Reaganite politics were built (and notably, the father, Steven, is at one point seen reading a book called Reagan: The Man, The President). After the child is rescued from the supernatural dimension and the family is seemingly reunited in domestic bliss, the psychic hired to communicate with the spirits, Tangina, triumphantly declares ‘This house is clean!’ Yet, subverting such neat resolutions, the ghostly realm erupts once again in the film’s final moments, and is revealed to stem from the Freeling’s own backyard: their house is built

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11 In his article ‘Blissing Out’, Andrew Britton suggests that what he calls ‘Reaganite entertainment’ tends to produce utopian visions of a Reaganite model of society, in which patriarchal nuclear family structures are reaffirmed ‘with unremitting insistence and stridency’ (2009, 129): he suggests that Poltergeist incites a wavering of this unquestioned celebration, as the overt reference to Reagan serves ‘to draw on and to disarticulate its audience’s uncertainties at one and the same time’ (2009, 149).
upon a gravesite. Subsequently, this vision of suburban domestic bliss is literally sucked into the muddy ground by the aggrieved ghosts first raised by the uncanny child’s penetrative perceptual capabilities.¹²

In tandem, throughout Poltergeist, the hauntings and Carol Anne’s connection with them are vaguely associated with the imperilled solidity of a triumphant American historical metanarrative. The film opens with an extreme close-up of the Iwo Jima Monument, accompanied by a particularly strident brass-band version of the American national anthem. While superficially acting as a symbol of American bravery and tenacity in WWII, the history of the Iwo Jima Monument is marked by conflicting accounts and myths, as well as controversy revolving around the questionable authenticity of the famous photo on which the statue was based.¹³

¹² As in The Shining, these ghosts hint at the Native American genocide upon which this suburbia is built, although the film does not explicitly draw this link. It is in fact quite notable the extent to which the now-familiar ‘Ancient Indian Burial Ground’ trope at first emerged in obfuscated ways in American horror films.

¹³ As Kirk Savage outlines in ‘Monument Wars’, the monument and photograph upon which it was based were initially thought to capture a heroic moment of untrammelled nationalism as a group of marines took the risk of raising the flag while under fire. The mountaintop upon which the marines are pictured was in fact captured a number of hours earlier, and a different group of marines than those involved in the original battle had returned to replace the small flag that had been placed there initially with a larger one. Thus, even the ‘original’ moment was reconstructed (Savage, 2009, 245).
expressing the irresolution of this nationally sanctified but historically disputed image, Poltergeist’s opening image erupts into thousands of tiny pixels of television snow, and the national anthem into the scratchy grain of audio static, as the camera pulls back from an extreme close-up to a medium shot that reveals that the image of the monument is displayed on a television screen. This pull back entails a gradual reveal of the borders of the television set’s screen that further insinuates the constructedness of this previously all-encompassing image. It is this breaking apart of a stable image of American identity that seems to summon the child, who walks stiffly down the stairs as the rest of her family sleep and puts her hands to the television screen, beckoning these disruptive spirits that her parents are incapable of perceiving. Later she repeats this action before famously telling her mystified family, ‘They’re here!’

Thus, each of these films positions the uncanny child at the heart of the shifting social structures of the 1980s, as the child’s paradoxically constituted otherness – her mélange of familiarity and strangeness, victim and victimizer, innocence and threatening indecipherability – becomes a threat to formerly secure adult identities and ideologies. Via the uncanny child, these films self-consciously illuminate Vivian Sobchack’s claim that horror cinema of this era suggests that ‘terrorized by its own past, not able to imagine and image its own presence in the future, American bourgeois patriarchy keeps getting trapped by its desire to escape the present’ (1987, 191). I suggest that these films expose not an impulse to escape the present, but an anxious awareness of the present’s wavering, and a concomitant uncertainty about the progression from present into future. The frailty of contemporary ideological structures, particularly the unquestioned social dominance of patriarchal adult identities, is unveiled by the uncanny child in frightening but potentially constructive ways in these films. In addition, the child’s association with repressed pasts that the adult protagonists have difficulty perceiving and comprehending not only unsettles the power balance between the adult protagonist and his child, but heralds the child’s resistance to chronological continuity and visions of futurity sanctioned by present adult society. This figure suggests that the social institutions and models of identity so taken for granted during this period will not be seamlessly continued into the future, as the child refuses to be shaped by and inculcated into the adult’s ideologies, instead empowering their subjugated position to subtly destabilize them. The uncanny child was largely displaced from the centre of the horror genre
in the later 1980s and early 1990s by the vastly popular slasher cycle. Yet, 20 years later at the turn of the millennium – a time in which symbolic and temporal coherence were again nebulously threatened – the uncanny child reemerged as one of the horror genre's key tropes, as is explored in Chapter Two.

Works Cited


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However, it is important to note that the slasher film in some ways assimilated and continued this preoccupation with childhood's symbolic tethering to the darkest remnants of the adult psyche and the lingering influence of childhood trauma central to these uncanny child films. As slasher films such as the formative *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1979) are at pains to demonstrate, the roots of the killer's psychosis lie in their childhood.


Filmography


