

**(In)Human Entity: A Study of the ‘Living’  
Doll in Contemporary Horror**

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Submitted to the University of Hull in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**University of Hull**

**August 2023**

### **Declaration of Inclusion of Published Work**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted for a degree at another university. Parts of chapter two of this thesis were published by the author as “‘Wholly Real and Yet Entirely Other’: Monstrous Marionettes in Angela Carter’s ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ and *The Magic Toyshop*” in *Dark Arts Journal: The Gothic Subject* (2015). Parts of chapter three and parts of the introduction were also published as “Discussing Dolls: Horror and the Human Double” in *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror Literature* (2019).

## Abstract

This thesis, as the first full length study of dolls and horror, provides an extensive examination of the 'living' doll figure in contemporary horror narratives. Dolls have been a significant feature of the horror genre for decades and their prevalence has only increased in recent years. This interdisciplinary study combines an analysis of visual and literary media and folkloric narratives to explore the historical, philosophical, and literary traditions behind this eerie, ongoing, phenomenon. In these narratives, when the seemingly inanimate gain life, either through possession, haunting, technological developments, or some other inexplicable force, their human counterparts are instinctively reminded of their own, impending mortality, and of their predetermined fate as humans to become, in death, inanimate, while these uncanny entities seemingly live on. This thesis adopts a thematic approach to demonstrate how these (in)human figures articulately reflect contemporary anxieties concerning consumed, fetishized, memorialised, and haunted objects. It demonstrates that the horror of the 'living' doll lies in its uncanny resemblance to something that it is inherently not, human, and in the impression, particularly within a horror context, that it possesses the potential to gain sentience, or at least a semblance of it. For many, these dolls are the stuff of childhood nightmares: lifeless bodies now animated, suspended between human and inhuman states, inducing fear in their human counterparts, and characterising horror. The intention of this thesis is to address the critical neglect of the animate doll subgenre, and to determine the 'living' doll's significance, enduring popularity, and persisting relevance.

## Acknowledgments

Throughout this project I have been inspired and supported by a host of people I would sincerely like to thank here. Firstly, Kevin Corstorphine, who from the beginning showed great enthusiasm for this project and whose encyclopaedic knowledge of all things Gothic, has been, at times, invaluable. Thank you for tolerating my weird tangents, resolving my occasional doubts, and for readily volunteering to get the pints in. Apologies that after all these years I am still incapable of saying your surname correctly. Thank you also to Jo Metcalf for so readily coming onboard as second supervisor in the latter stages of this project, your external perspective and meticulous attention to detail have undoubtedly helped shape this into a better thesis.

PhD study brings with it inevitable highs and lows, having those around you who empathize is something I have found to be particularly important. In this regard I would like to thank fellow Hull postgraduate students Kathryn Blance, Matt Crofts, Layla Hendow, and Anousch Khorikian for their commitment to commiserating, celebrating, or procrastinating with me whenever the occasion demanded it. In addition, thank you to Gul Dag for regularly reminding me that there is indeed life outside the PhD, I am incredibly grateful for your enduring friendship over the years. Thanks also go to Dan Mattingly and Martin Nickson for both providing, at points, a healthy dose of much needed cynicism regarding academia. Thank you to Janine Hatter at the university's Doctoral College for hosting regular writing retreats, your support both within and outside of these sessions has been much appreciated.

Over the course of this project, I have had the great pleasure of getting to know many members of the wider Gothic community through conferences, symposia, and events. Over the years I have found Gothicists, almost without exception, to be incredibly welcoming and encouraging, particularly to nervous postgraduate students. In this respect I would especially like

to thank Monica Germana, Xavier Aldana Reyes, Catherine Spooner, and Angela Wright for their continued kindness and interest in my work. I would also like to thank Evert Jan van Leeuwen and Michael Newton for welcoming me into the Gothic studies community here in the Netherlands. Thanks also go to Jen Baker, Nicky Bowring, Lauren Bruce, Aly Edwards, Evan Gledhill, Karen Graham, Kate Harvey, and Cat Smith for always making the conference experience an enjoyable, and oftentimes memorable, one.

This project would have been an altogether more isolating, less enjoyable, and therefore much more difficult experience, without the valued friendship of those both in Hull and further afield, and as such I would like to thank Ellie Ashton, Meg Baillie, Fern Hicks, Kerry Syrett, and Yannick Veilleux-Lepage. Also, particular thanks to Bob Reid for persistently questioning why on earth anyone would choose this as a PhD topic. Thanks also go to Anna Bean and Michelle Dee for so readily hopping on the creepy doll train, I very much look forward to our next project.

Thank you to my partner, Simon Willmetts, for your steady support during the latter half of this project. You have managed to put up with me at my most stressed, tired, and pretentious, and for that I am incredibly grateful. Thanks for keeping me extremely well fed, for stressing the sanctity of weekends, and for your love, always.

Lastly, to my family, thank you, this thesis is for you. Thank you to my parents for your unwavering support, without which this would not exist. You have always given me the freedom to make my own choices in life and for that I am extremely grateful. Dad, I am sorry I did not pick a more cheerful topic.

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## **Introduction**

“Dolls... those emissaries between dead and living.”<sup>1</sup>

**Andrei Sinyavsky**

Within the horror genre, dolls are everywhere. They crowd the covers of vintage paperbacks, lie in the crevices of long since abandoned buildings, and ingratiate themselves into the domestic sphere with seeming ease. Indeed, their pervasiveness is such that a slow camera pan to an abandoned doll in horror cinema has almost become shorthand for terror. Due to their sheer number, it is perhaps inevitable that these eerie ‘living’ doll horror narratives appear to have influenced the public imaginary. Indeed, it is a self-perpetuating cycle. The idea of a sentient doll provoking fear did not start with the horror genre, but these narratives have, undoubtedly, greatly influenced it. Annabelle, Chucky, and other lesser known icons of the subgenre, typify our enduring cultural fascination with animism and anthropomorphism. Their faces, whether of porcelain or plastic, mimic our own and thus are imbued with an eerily uncanny hue. The threat that these lifeless entities may acquire sentience, or at least a semblance of it, is ever-present. For many, these dolls are the stuff of childhood nightmares; lifeless bodies now animated, suspended between human and inhuman states, inducing fear in their human counterparts, and characterising horror.

This thesis examines contemporary horror’s ongoing preoccupation with the figure of the ‘living’ doll through an exploration of the historical, philosophical, and literary traditions behind this chilling phenomenon. It takes a thematic approach to analysing the ‘living’ doll figure within contemporary horror, considering the doll as a consumed object, fetishized object, memorialised

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Gross, “Introduction”, in *On Dolls*, ed. Kenneth Gross (London, Notting Hill Editions Ltd, 2012), back cover.



object, and haunted object, respectively. Together these four chapters highlight the prevalence, demonstrate the scope, and explore the significance of the 'living' doll figure. Collectively they provide an identifiable, yet evolving picture of the monstrous doll, and crucially of its current form and function within the Gothic. This study draws on a wide range of sources from literature, film, television, and the visual arts to provide a broader picture of the 'living' doll figure within the genre. The key texts examined within this thesis are all contemporary, specifically post 1967. The 1960s saw a resurgence in monstrous doll narratives that paved the way for later adaptations. Moreover, these contemporary narratives, even more so than earlier additions to the killer doll subgenre, succinctly reflect the traumas and anxieties of their human counterparts, and thus, of our contemporary society.

The uncanny is employed throughout this study as a means of identifying and comprehending the horror elicited by a doll that appears inert yet is, in some ways, portrayed as 'living'. As this thesis will demonstrate these uncanny entities are particularly suited to a genre that revels in the unknown, embraces monsters in all their varied manifestations, and highlights particularly human fears. Much of the terror that these uncanny doppelgängers elicit in their human counterparts is driven by this inescapable comparison, by confrontation with the unnerving notion that these lifeless figures, who bear an uncanny resemblance to us, are not, in fact, too dissimilar from our living selves. This terror only escalates when these figures, perhaps inevitably within a horror context, acquire a semblance of humanity.

To date there is no extended study of, or edited volume devoted to, the subject of dolls and horror. The intention of this thesis, as the first full length study of the 'living' doll figure in contemporary horror, is to address the critical neglect of the animate doll subgenre, and to determine the 'living' doll's significance, enduring popularity, and persisting relevance. This thesis is not, nor does it endeavour to be, a complete record of dolls in contemporary horror literature,

film, and television. Rather it aims to provide an overview of the extent to which they appear in the horror genre, and more importantly of their form and function. In these narratives, when the seemingly inanimate gain life, either through possession, haunting, technological developments, or some other inexplicable force, their human counterparts are instinctively reminded of their own, impending mortality, and of their predetermined fate as humans to become, in death, inanimate, while these uncanny entities seemingly live on.

## Dolls in Fiction: A Brief History

A discussion of ‘living’ dolls and contemporary horror narratives should not take place without first recognising the role that these figures occupy in earlier fictional narratives.<sup>2</sup> The “ontological ambiguity between the animate and inanimate”<sup>3</sup> that is at the very heart of Western fictions of artificial life, and therefore of this study, has been a fixation of literature, theatre, and the arts for centuries. From Plato’s employment of the puppet figure as a metaphor for humankind in *Lams*,<sup>4</sup> to William Shakespeare’s frequent use of the term in his plays,<sup>5</sup> through to Carlo Collodi’s urtext of humanmade life gaining sentience *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), and the makeshift doll-like being Odradek in Franz Kafka’s ‘The Cares of a Family Man’ (1919), these artificial doppelgängers are ubiquitous. Stuart Culver emphasises this, stating that “the animate object is hardly a new figure in fiction; the object narratives and object narrators of the eighteenth century, Hoffman’s uncanny objects, Dickens’s and Stowe’s animate furniture—these are part of a well-established if uneven tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Nineteenth-century literature meanwhile frequently exploited the figure of the doll for didactic means. Mary Clai Jones discerns a trend here in advice for Victorian girls introduced through instructive prefaces, “playing with dolls and reading doll stories will mould girls into

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<sup>2</sup> For further criticism on this topic see Lois Rostow Kuznets’ *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development* (1994), Christopher Flint’s “Speaking Objects: The Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction” (1998), Jonathan Lamb’s “Modern Metamorphoses and Disgraceful Tales” (2001), Gaby Wood’s *Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* and Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 116.

<sup>4</sup> “Let us suppose that each of us living creatures is an ingenious puppet [thauma] of the gods, whether contrived by way of a toy of theirs or for some serious purpose.” - Plato, *Lams*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: George G. Harrap, 1994), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Notable examples of this include: “I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying” – William Shakespeare, “Hamlet”, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1919), 1029; “Belike you mean to make a puppet of me” – William Shakespeare, “The Taming of the Shrew”, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1919), 301; “Fie, Fie! You Counterfeit, you puppet, you!” (Act 3, Scene 2) - William Shakespeare, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1919), 209; and “Thou, an Egyptian puppet, shalt be shown in Rome as well as I” - William Shakespeare, “Anthony and Cleopatra”, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. W. J. Craig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1919), 1170. For Shakespeare ‘puppet’ is largely a term of contempt that reduces women to the status of object to ‘poppets’ or ‘motions’, and suggests not only derision, but mockery.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Culver, “What Manikins Want: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz and The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows,” *Representations*, 21 (Winter 1988): 115.

exemplary middle-class women.”<sup>7</sup> As Ross Chambers determines, “from the inaugural work of E. T. A. Hoffmann [...] and Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*, to contemporary writers like Christopher Bram, Peter Carey, and Thomas Berger” these fictions are persistently fixated on the “the question of what the phenomenon of artificial life might mean for a definition of the human.”<sup>8</sup> The human and its artificial counterpart are inherently linked in these fictions, fashioning a complex connection that has since crossed over into contemporary real-world debates over cloning, artificial intelligence, and the moral implications of such technological developments.

While the fictional history of dolls dates back centuries, the role that these figures occupy in our social history is even more established; dolls have been an important part of childhood play for millennia. The British Museum houses several ancient Egyptian ragdolls, “made from linen stuffed with rags and papyrus,”<sup>9</sup> which are believed to date from between the first and fifth century. In 2004 archaeologists unearthed a 4,000-year-old stone doll, “crudely carved with eyes, nose and mouth and wavy hair”<sup>10</sup> on the Mediterranean island of Pantelleria. As Linda Rodriguez McRobbie observes, “over millennia, toy dolls crossed continents and social strata, were made from sticks and rags, porcelain and vinyl, and have been found in the hands of children everywhere.”<sup>11</sup> Dolls, it seems, are a near-universal feature of childhood play. These diminutive objects, unanimated except by their owner’s hand, are perfectly suited to the projection of any need, want, or desire, “just as much as they could be made out of anything, they could be made into anything.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, as Susan Yi Sencindiver discerns, “in prehistoric excavations, archaeologists have

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Clai Jones, “Refashioning Spaces of Play in Victorian Doll Stories,” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 12:3 (Winter 2016): 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ross Chambers, “The Queer and the Creepy: Western Fictions of Artificial Life,” *Pacific Coast Philology*, 40:1 (2005): 20.

<sup>9</sup> “Rag Doll,” The British Museum, accessed January 2, 2023, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G\\_1905-1021-13](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1905-1021-13).

<sup>10</sup> Sophie Arie, “Dig Finds Ancient Stone Doll,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/aug/06/research.arts>.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Rodriguez McRobbie, “The History of Creepy Dolls,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 15, 2015, <HTTP://WWW.SMITHSONIANMAG.COM/HISTORY/HISTORY-CREEPY-DOLLS-180955916/#VI05ZBXC00QG5QBC.99>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

encountered difficulties in distinguishing the doll from statuette, toy from sacred talisman and other anthropomorphic ritual objects,”<sup>13</sup> further blurring boundaries. Thus, as Max von Boehn speculates, the play doll “might easily have developed from the idol in the course of time, one and the same piece perhaps serving different purposes in ages of differing beliefs.”<sup>14</sup>

Driven by the Industrial Revolution, the doll-making industry in Europe thrived during the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> By the 1920s however, the United States had become the leader in commercial doll production as manufacturers crafted “more durable dolls made from leather, celluloid, and rubber that did not require the importation of porcelain.”<sup>16</sup> The most substantial revolution in doll manufacturing occurred in Britain during the Victorian era, at a time when public interest in the legal rights of children was steadily increasing, and where by the end of the nineteenth century “the welfare of children was the subject of much political debate.”<sup>17</sup> As Joana Rita Ramalho observes, this recognition of the child as potential consumer brought about “the emergence of a new cultural space allotted to playthings and the development of a mass market for toys. Dolls of this period had realistic features and were made from a variety of materials such as cloth, wood, papier-mâché, wax, and porcelain.”<sup>18</sup> For the most part the latter were intended as decorative or collectable items rather than objects intended for play. It is largely these delicate porcelain figures which populate Gothic narratives;<sup>19</sup> indeed, these antique China dolls have practically become the archetype of a haunted doll in contemporary horror cinema. The tendency, it seems, is not to reflect tangible developments in doll fabrication, but to tap into its past. The ubiquity of the antique doll within the contemporary Gothic reflects the genre’s enduring

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<sup>13</sup> Susan Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll’s Uncanny Soul”, in *The Gothic and the Everyday: Living Gothic*, ed. Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 121.

<sup>14</sup> Max von Boehn, *Dolls and Puppets*, trans. Josephine Nicoll (London: George G. Harrap, 1932), 103.

<sup>15</sup> Specifically in England, France, Germany, and The Netherlands.

<sup>16</sup> Joana Rita Ramalho, “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls: Reconfiguring Personhood through Object Vivification in Gothic Film,” *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, 6:2 (2020): 30.

<sup>17</sup> Ginger S. Frost. *Victorian Childhoods* (Westport: Praeger, 2009), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ramalho, “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls,” 31.

<sup>19</sup> There are of course exceptions, Chucky being perhaps the most notable one.

preoccupation with the past, for as Devendra P. Varma discerns, “the Gothic mind loves to brood over the hallowed glory of the past.”<sup>20</sup>

These manufactured objects, frail in both form and humanity, provoke a peculiar and enduring fascination in their human possessors. A fascination that is easily translated into the fictional realms of the weird, horrific, and macabre. Austrian poet and writer Rainer Maria Rilke was particularly vocal about his hatred of dolls, he “came to consider them as quasi-vampiric artificial creatures”<sup>21</sup> that live “tirelessly through someone else’s power,”<sup>22</sup> their very existence imposing upon him a silence that was “larger than human.”<sup>23</sup> These uncanny objects raise their heads outside of the Gothic sphere, yet they appear especially at home within the horror genre.

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<sup>20</sup> Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame: Being a History of the Gothic Novel in England: Its Origins, Efflorescence, Disintegration, and Residuary Influences* (London: Arthur Barker, 1957), 18.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Munro, *Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 162.

<sup>22</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke*, trans. Eva-Maria Simms (Frankfurt: 1996), 534.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

## Dolls in Horror Literature: An Overview

Dolls have appeared in the horror genre since its very beginnings. Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland, or the Transformation: An American Tale* (1798), commonly considered a founding text of American Gothic, contains ventriloquism, whilst M. R. James's ghost story 'The Haunted Dolls' House' (1923) plays out chilling human dramas within its miniaturised doll world. Horror narratives that focus on the concept of the 'living' doll number too many to list, from novels including William Goldman's *Magic* (1975) and Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home* (1973), to short stories including William Richard Matheson's 'The Doll That Does Everything' (1954), Joyce Carol Oates's 'The Doll-Master' (2016), and Gerald Kersh's 'The Extraordinarily Horrible Dummy' (1939), the field is, it seems, encouragingly rife with macabre dolls.<sup>24</sup> Menacing dolls are also showcased in the work of Robert Bloch. His short story 'The Mannikin' (1937) "features a grotesque, sentient figure that grows from the back of a character called Simon Maglore [...] The 'growth' controls Maglore's will [...] [and] has the shape of a small living creature, a mannikin, an undeveloped evil twin."<sup>25</sup> Another of his short stories 'Mannikins of Horror' (1939) features diminutive figures who, equipped with their own brains, are animated through mind control, thus skilfully demonstrating, "the projected psychological horror that we can cast onto effigies of

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<sup>24</sup> For further examples see Leigh Blackmore, 'A Puppet's Parody of Joy': Dolls, Puppets, and Mannikins as Diabolical Other in Ramsey Campbell." Here Blackmore notes that "the field is full of such stories as "The Doll Named Silvio" by Michael Kernan, "None before Me" by Sidney Carroll, [...] "The Doll of Death" by Vivian Meik, "The Doll Queen" by Carlos Fuentes, "The Doll That Does Everything" by Richard Matheson, "Doll-Baby" by C. H. Sherman, and "The Doll-House" by James Cross, not to mention the anonymous "The Doll's Ball," Karl Hansen's "Doll's Eyes," F. Marion Crawford's "The Doll's Ghost," [...] Hester Gaskell Gorst's "The Doll's House," Ronald Anthony Cross's "The Dolls: A Tragic Romance," and Jack Snow's "Let's Play House." And let us not forget such doll-themed horror tales as M. R. James's classic "The Haunted Doll's House," [...] E. T. A. Hoffman's "The Sandman," Gerald Kersh's "The Extraordinarily Horrible Dummy," Fitz-James O'Brien's "The Wordsmith," [...] John Collier's "Evening Primrose," Robert Aickman's classic "The Inner Room," Frederic Brown's classic "The Geezenstacks," Davis Grubb's "Where the Woodbine Twineth," and Saki's "The Toys of Peace." The list goes on." – Leigh Blackmore, "'A Puppet's Parody of Joy': Dolls, Puppets, and Mannikins as Diabolical Other in Ramsey Campbell", in *Ramsey Campbell: Critical Essays on the Modern Master of Horror*, ed. Gary William Crawford (Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc, 2014), 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

ourselves,”<sup>26</sup> while in ‘The Weird Tailor’ (1950) a grieving father employs a tailor to produce a suit for his deceased son who he intends to reanimate through witchcraft.

Thomas Ligotti is another horror writer who recurrently utilises macabre dolls, puppets, and mannequins within his work.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, he named one of his short story collections *Sideshow* (2003) which, as Leigh Blackmore observes, points “to the overall importance in Ligotti of carnivals, puppet shows, and other such atmospheric events where the celebratory can easily slide into and evoke the grotesque.”<sup>28</sup> Ben Woodard suggests that within Ligotti’s fiction, these uncanny figures “replace the valorized subject of philosophy – that of the free thinking human being,”<sup>29</sup> while Scott Connors proposes that his utilisation of these macabre beings which “appear to be human but are not human” is yet another feature of “the horror in liminal space”<sup>30</sup> that his work typifies. Ligotti has commented, that for him, the puppet figure,<sup>31</sup> alongside its uncanny kin, “emblemizes the entrapment and manipulation of human beings by forces beyond our control.”<sup>32</sup> This entrapment is evident within his work, from the jester-come-human hybrid in his short story ‘The Bells Will Sound Forever’ (1997), to the macabre mannequins in his novel *My Work is Not Yet Done* (2002), and the seemingly non-sentient dolls of his poem ‘I have a Special Plan for this World’ (2000) wherein “the antics of those dolls grew strange and the fragile strings grew taut with their tiny pullings.”<sup>33</sup> Dolls are also vital to the plot of his short story ‘Dr. Voke and Mr. Veech’

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Ligotti’s website also hosts a useful database of literary quotes on dolls, puppets, and other humanoid figures: “Puppet Passage of the Day: Being an Online Anthology of Passages Concerning Puppets, Marionettes, Mannikins, Dolls and Other Slavish Freaks Devoid of Autonomy,” Thomas Ligotti Online, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.ligotti.net/showthread.php?t=1725>.

<sup>28</sup> Blackmore, “A Puppet’s Parody of Joy,” 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ben Woodard, “Mad Speculation and Absolute Inhumanism: Lovecraft, Ligotti, and the Weirding of Philosophy,” *Continent*, 1:1 (2011): 5.

<sup>30</sup> Scott Connors, “Ligotti, Thomas”, in *Supernatural Literature of the World: An Encyclopedia Volume 2 G-O*, eds. S. T. Joshi and Stefan Dziemianowicz (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 729.

<sup>31</sup> The centrality of the puppet figure to Ligotti’s work is celebrated in Joseph S. Pulver’s 2013 anthology *The Grimscribe’s Puppets*. This collection which features both new and established authors of horror and weird fiction pays homage to the eeriness of Ligotti’s writing.

<sup>32</sup> Michael McCarty and Mark McLaughlin, “Writer Thomas Ligotti Feels the Taste of Death on His Lips as He Shares about Puppets, Nightmares and Gothic Splendor,” *Sci-Fi Weekly*, September 15, 2008, <https://www.syfy.com/scifi/sfw/interviews/sfw19474.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Ligotti, *I Have a Special Plan for This World* (London: Durtro, 2000), 5.



(1983) which raises “sinister questions concerning the true nature of dolls, puppets, mannikins, and other human-like effigies [...] [in it] Ligotti also questions the relationship of these ‘pseudo-humans’ to their makers and manipulators.”<sup>34</sup> In his short story ‘The Puppet Masters’ (1989) the anonymous narrator converses with the assorted dolls that populate his room. Intermittently he hears them speak and is haunted by “the expression of infinite evil on their faces which rendered me speechless thereafter.”<sup>35</sup> The titular character of Ligotti’s short story ‘The Clown Puppet’ (1996), an antiquated marionette, brings a nonsensical chaos to a local shopkeeper’s livelihood. His short story ‘Mad Night of Atonement’ (1994) meanwhile, showcases a plethora of uncanny beings:

puppets and marionettes were strung up at various elevations, relieved of their weight by fragile glistening threads; mannikins posed in a paralyzed leisure which looked at once grotesque and idyllic; other dummies and an odd assortment of dolls sat in miniature chairs here and there, or simply sprawled about the floorboards, sometimes propping each other up back to back. But among these mock-people, as became evident the longer one gazed at the stage, were hidden ones who, rather ably, imitated the imitations.<sup>36</sup>

The expanse of eerie figures here amplifies their inherent horror.

The intimate connection between child and doll has inspired contemporary authors Angela Carter, Susan Hill, and Joyce Carol Oates among others, to craft narratives which intimate that the doll and child retain not just a collective identity but a shared soul. While the child protagonist of Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) reveals her gruesome desire to dismember a gifted doll

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<sup>34</sup> Blackmore, “A Puppet’s Parody of Joy,” 33.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Ligotti, *Noctuary* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1994), 172.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

to “see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability.”<sup>37</sup> In Ian McEwan’s short story ‘The Dolls’ (1994), seemingly innocent childhood playthings turn malevolent as the young protagonist Peter is terrorised by his sister’s dolls. They pin him to a bed and forcibly remove his limbs, “the dolls had grabbed his right arm and were pulling and yo-ho heave ho-ing,”<sup>38</sup> before transplanting them onto their own broken bodies, “it took the leg and slotted it on. A perfect fit.”<sup>39</sup> Claudia, the notorious eternal child of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), is unable to age, and thus her body is reduced to that of a “jointless doll.”<sup>40</sup> Initially smitten with her extensive doll collection, Claudia later views the dolls as her eerie doppelgängers, and proceeds to systematically destroy them, a behaviour that comes to a head when she violently crushes the head of a custom doll, “popping it so it bobbed and broke in a heap of glass that fell now from her open, bloody hand.”<sup>41</sup> Nina Allen’s speculative novel *The Dollmaker* (2019) keeps its living dolls largely within figurative bounds, employing them as a means to tell “a love story about becoming real.”<sup>42</sup> A. S. Byatt’s short story ‘Dolls’ Eyes’ (2013) explores the intricacies of the human-doll relationship in a house “that was not at all odd, except for the dolls.”<sup>43</sup> These dolls, seemingly able to exact revenge on their owner’s behalf, mutilate the eyes of her former lover, leaving them with blank eyes that perfectly mimic the dolls’ disturbingly fixed gaze. Thus, the human uncannily mimics the doll, the doll itself an aesthetically human replica.

Merritt’s *Burn, Witch, Burn!* (1933), Theodore’s Sturgeon’s ‘The Hag Seleen’ (1942), Joseph Payne Brennan’s ‘Death in Peru’ (1954), August Derleth’s ‘Miss Esperson’ (1962), and Sarban’s<sup>44</sup> ‘The Doll Maker’ (1960) all utilise doll-centred magic to macabre effect. Algernon Blackwood,

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<sup>37</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 20.

<sup>38</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Daydreamer* (London: Vintage, 1994), 35

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 74.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 210.

<sup>42</sup> Paraic O’Donnell, “The Dollmaker by Nina Allan review – a haunting literary experiment,” *The Guardian*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/02/the-dollmaker-nina-allan-review>.

<sup>43</sup> A. S. Byatt, “Dolls’ Eyes”, in *The New Uncanny: Tales of Unease*, ed. Sarah Eyre and Ra Page (London: Comma Press, 2008), 107.

<sup>44</sup> Sarban was the penname of British writer John William Wall (1910 – 1989).

Janine Burke, Winifred M. Carnegie, Carol Ellis, Francis King, Vernon Lee, Richard Matheson, Joyce Carol Oates, Guy N. Smith, Terry Tapp, John Wagner, and Robert Westall have all published macabre tales simply titled ‘The Doll.’<sup>45</sup> Given this abundance of macabre doll-centred short stories, it is unsurprising then, that numerous collections centring on these uncanny figures have also been produced. Notable editions include: Leonard Wolf’s *Doubles, Dummies, and Dolls: 21 Terror Tales of Replication* (1995), Sarah Eyre and Ra Page’s *The New Uncanny: Tales of Unease* (2008), Ellen Datlow’s *The Doll Collection* (2015), and Justin A. Burnett’s *Mannequin: Tales of Wood Made Flesh* (2019). Single authored collections on the topic are also available with Camilla Grudova<sup>46</sup> and Joyce Carol Oates<sup>47</sup> crafting some of the most eerie. Ghoulish dolls also inhabit graphic novels, populating Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Mr. Punch* (1994), Stéphane Blanquet’s *Toys in the Basement* (2005), Winshluss<sup>48</sup> *Pinocchio* (2008) and Evangeline Lilly’s *The Squickerwonkers* (2013). The visual nature of these texts enables the authors and illustrators to overtly showcase the horror of their uncanny creations.

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<sup>45</sup> Blackwood’s story was published in 1946, Burke’s in 1997, Carnegie’s in 1949, Ellis’s in 1991, King’s in 1968, Lee’s in 1927, Matheson’s in 1986, Oates’s in 2016, Smith’s in 2009, Tapp’s in 1978, Wagner’s in 1983, and Westall’s in 1989.

<sup>46</sup> See *The Doll’s Alphabet* (2017).

<sup>47</sup> See *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (1994) and *The Doll-Master* (2016).

<sup>48</sup> Winshluss is the penname of French comics artist and filmmaker Vincent Paronnaud.

## Dolls in Horror Film: An Overview

Similarly, these totemic miniature humans populate horror cinema and television. Writers continue to capitalise on their eerie nature, creating narratives that transgress bodily borders, where troubled toys come to life. While a precious childhood toy is regularly portrayed, particularly in narratives written for children, as a supportive confidante, as Craig Ian Mann suggests, “there is something intrinsically unsettling”<sup>49</sup> about these figures. These “inanimate objects that often approximate the appearance of living things, their blank, unblinking eyes and motionless limbs can easily become a source of disquiet rather than comfort in a suitably darkened room.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, while the fantasy of a treasured toy coming to life may be a bewitching possibility or untold desire for some, horror cinema directly threatens that notion as the childhood playthings it portrays become sources of suspicion, trepidation, and terror rather than pleasure. This subversion is a trademark of the killer toy subgenre of horror.

Before examining the established trend for dolls in horror cinema, it is necessary to contextualise the genre’s killer toy subgenre, “an enduring facet of the horror film”<sup>51</sup> which has, at this point, spanned multiple decades. These toys appear in various forms – as dolls, puppets, figurines, models, and other assorted childhood playthings – and commit violent acts, often under the influence of supernatural possession or malevolent technology. Coulrophobia<sup>52</sup> and pediophobia merge in Tobe Hooper’s supernatural horror *Poltergeist* (1982) as a grotesque clown doll terrorizes the inhabitants of seemingly peaceful suburbia,<sup>53</sup> whilst the child protagonist of Joe Dante’s dark fantasy horror *The Hole* (2009) is intimidated by an uncanny jester toy. David

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<sup>49</sup> Craig Ian Mann, “They Don’t Make ‘Em Like That Anymore: Dolls vs. Modernity”, in *Toy Stories: The Toy as Hero in Literature, Comics and Film*, ed. Tanya Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2017), 62.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>52</sup> Fear (phobia) of clowns.

<sup>53</sup> This is later parodied with limited success in Keenen Ivory Wayans’ horror comedy *Scary Movie 2* (2001).

Schmoeller's thriller-horror *Puppetmaster* (1989), in "an excellent illustration of the theatricality of the horror"<sup>54</sup> presents an exceptionally uncanny puppet in the form of Pinhead, that despite its miniature stature is equipped with full-size human hands. This overt theatricality is also present in William Castle's surrealist horror *Shanks* (1974) where an accomplished puppeteer manipulates the bodies of the deceased to enact revenge on his behalf. Murderous mannequins inhabit the 'Manikins of Horror' segment of Roy Ward Barker's anthology horror *Asylum* (1972),<sup>55</sup> David Schmoeller's supernatural slasher *Tourist Trap* (1979), and M. J. Bassett's psychological horror *Silent Hill: Revelation* (2012). Meanwhile murderous teddy bears populate Lew Lehman's Canadian horror *The Pit* (1981), Peter Manoogian's slapstick horror *Demonic Toys* (1992), Karl Holt's horror comedy *Benny Loves You* (2019), and Rhys Waterfield's independent slasher *Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey* (2022).<sup>56</sup> A mechanical clown-like puppet named Billy is the surreal mouthpiece of choice for serial killer John 'Jigsaw' Kramer in James Wan's *Saw* franchise (2004-2021). Wan's interest in ghoulish puppets resurfaced in *Dead Silence* (2007) where homicidal ventriloquist dummies fulfil the prediction of deceased ventriloquist Mary Shaw: "beware the stare of Mary Shaw. She had no children, only dolls. If you see her in your dreams, make sure you never ever scream, or she'll cut your tongue out at the seam."<sup>57</sup> Murderous Christmas models populate Martin Kitrosser's festive horror *Silent Night, Deadly Night 5: The Toy Maker* (1991), Michael Dougherty's seasonal horror comedy *Krampus* (2015), Tristan Price's toyshop horror *The Elf* (2016), and Nicholas Verso's yuletide horror *Toys of Terror* (2020). Such movies undoubtedly satirize the commercial frenzy of the Christmas period. As Mann observes, the proliferation of these killer toy movies has meant an arguably inevitable move to self-parody in recent years with "films such as *Black Devil Doll* (2007),

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<sup>54</sup> André Loiselle, *Theatricality in the Horror Film: A Brief Study on the Dark Pleasures of Screen Artifice*, (London: Anthem Press, 2020), 80.

<sup>55</sup> The screenplay for *Asylum* was written by established horror author Robert Bloch. The 'Manikins of Horror' segment based on his 1939 short story of the same name.

<sup>56</sup> On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2022 copyright on A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* book series (1924-1928) ended and the works entered the public domain, enabling the writers of *Winnie the Pooh: Blood and Honey* to subvert the iconic bear's tale.

<sup>57</sup> *Dead Silence*, directed by James Wan, performances by Ryan Kwanten, Amber Valletta, Donnie Wahlberg, and Michael Fairman (2007; Los Angeles, CA: Twisted Pictures), DVD.

*The Gingerbread Man* (2005) and its two sequels. Even Pinocchio has had his turn as a lurid horror monster in the sensationally titled *Pinocchio's Revenge*.<sup>58</sup>

This juvenile longing for a treasured object to gain a semblance of life has been the subject of much criticism, with Freud observing that “children are not afraid of their dolls coming to life – they may even want them to.”<sup>59</sup> Charles Baudelaire in his influential 1853 essay ‘A Philosophy of Toys’ likewise emphasised the significance of this child/toy relationship, concluding that “the toys become actors in the great drama of life, reduced in size by the camera obscura of their little brains.”<sup>60</sup> He stressed that “the overriding desire of most children is to get at and see the soul of their toys.”<sup>61</sup> This desire develops into an “infantile mania.”<sup>62</sup> Echoing Baudelaire, Marina Warner poses that in play, “a child beams her projective imagination upon inert material things and animates them with fantasy, infusing objects with meaning.”<sup>63</sup> Through the act of play, then, “mental objects become real: the pebbles and grass make a delicious meal [...] a cotton reel can be a tank or a house. The clothes peg a wounded soldier or Mummy.”<sup>64</sup> Fundamentally children are captivated by the notion that the seemingly lifeless may become alive, and are thus “fascinated with the boundaries between humans and other animals, and between animate and inanimate, not because they have serious problems distinguishing one from another ... but because they seek the pleasure of the *as if*.”<sup>65</sup> Whether through the act of playing with toys, roleplay, or dress up, much of a child’s joy is found within the shadowy space between the real and the unreal. It is within this sinister in between that doll-centred horror narratives seemingly thrive.

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<sup>58</sup> Mann, “They Don’t Make ‘Em Like That Anymore,” 63.

<sup>59</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 141.

<sup>60</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1995), 198.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Marina Warner, “Out of an Old Toy Chest,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 43:2 (Summer 2009): 9.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Brian Boyd, “Tails Within Tales”, in *Knowing Animals*, eds. Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2007), 224.

In many of these narratives the inherent connection between human and object is inescapable. Such is the case in Tod Browning's cult horror *The Devil-Doll* (1936). Adapted from Abraham Merritt's novel *Burn Witch Burn!* (1932) it showcases a French scientist, who, concerned about overpopulation and the impact of this on the planet's resources, develops a formula to shrink humans, rendering them akin to miniature, eerily lifelike dolls. *The Devil-Doll* is a notable, early example, of the 'living' doll figure in horror, yet, as Hans Staats discerns, "the devil-doll in Browning's film is still in its nascent form [...] [the] monstrous toys are little more than miniaturized adults [...] [controlled] through telekinesis, somnambulists that are represented through the use of trick photography, multiple exposures, and oversized sets."<sup>66</sup> This transformation of a human victim into a passive doll-like figure is a recurrent trend in horror cinema which can be found in an assortment of texts, ranging from Ernest B. Schoedsack's pulp horror *Dr. Cyclops* (1940) to Matty Beckerman's sorority horror *The Row* (2018). Once transformed, moulded in the vision of their creator's imaginings, the resulting figures are set free to enact their malicious will. Burt I. Gordon's black and white horror *Attack of the Puppet People* (1958) takes this literally, as a disturbed dollmaker shrinks his victims to the size of figurines, before confining them inside display tubes to be used later for entertainment. Tarsem Singh's psychological thriller *The Cell* (2000) takes this a step further, as a serial killer drowns his victims, then bleaches and beautifies them until they resemble dolls, "some mutilated, others adorned with animal skulls and birds' heads,"<sup>67</sup> before finally placing them in his basement amongst his macabre collection. In Sean MacGregor's slasher horror *People Toys* (1974) a group of troubled children kill their surrogate parents, staging the killings "as communal child's play in which children fashion elaborate kill-traps or build snowmen around corpses."<sup>68</sup> The climax of this performance is a grotesque tea party

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<sup>66</sup> Hans Staats, "Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll: *Child's Play* and the Modern Horror Film," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 11 (June 2012): 56.

<sup>67</sup> Loiselle, *Theatricality in the Horror Film*, 79.

<sup>68</sup> T. S Kord, *Little Horrors: How Cinema's Evil Children Play On Our Guilt* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2016), 55.

where the bodies are settled around a table like dolls, and the children's interactions with their 'people toys' mimic the typical act of child toy play.

Variations of this premise emerge in a number of serial killer narratives: in Erick Santamaria's Canadian horror *The Playgirl Killer* (1967) an unstable artist crafts vast tableaux from the frozen corpses of his female victims; in Jean Beauduin's thriller horror *The Collector* (2002) a homicidal sculptor assembles his victims body parts into an elaborate display; in the series two 'Sakizuki' episode of Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal* (2014) the killer constructs a human mural into which he is later sewn by Hannibal Lecter himself. Surely the most well-known variation of this set-up can be seen in Alfred Hitchcock's iconic horror *Psycho* (1960), "in which motel owner-cum-taxidermist Norman Bates stuffs the body of his deceased mother and pretends that she is still alive and as domineering as she was before he killed her."<sup>69</sup> In these narratives the killer's lack of empathy is analogised, as André Loiselle observes, "through the uncanny theatricality of the doll or the puppet."<sup>70</sup>

Tod Browning's silent melodrama *The Unholy Three* (1925) has been identified by Staats as "the first screen appearance of the evil ventriloquist,"<sup>71</sup> it was later remade by Jack Conway as a talkie in 1930.<sup>72</sup> The overt malevolence of its ventriloquist is regularly reiterated in later cinematic depictions of the theatrical figure. Within the subgenre, particularly in those narratives involving puppets and ventriloquist dummies, these killer toys have routinely operated as the wicked adversary to their, generally human, counterpart since the release of James Cruze's musical drama *The Great Gabbo* in 1929. Based on Ben Hecht's 1928 short story 'The Rival Dummy', *The Great*

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<sup>69</sup> Loiselle, *Theatricality in the Horror Film*, 79.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Staats, "Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll," 57.

<sup>72</sup> The term 'talkie' denotes the presence of a soundtrack in film and is thus distinct from silent cinema. The first feature film originally presented as a talkie was Alan Crossland's musical drama *The Jazz Singer* which premiered on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1927.



*Gabbo* depicts ventriloquist, Gabbo's decline into madness as he utilises his dummy Otto as his primary means of self-expression. Despite Gabbo's inherent human monstrosity it is Otto, not Gabbo, that the audience is guided to fear with its overly large gawking eyes and eerie frozen grin, an uncanny image that is only heightened when the puppet ostensibly begins to communicate on behalf of his master. This highly problematic relationship between Gabbo and Otto adheres to Jacob Stein's claim that "the relationship between a ventriloquist and the ventriloquist's dummy is a self-induced schizophrenia."<sup>73</sup> Likewise, Neil Norman suspects "that ventriloquists use dummies to express their darkest thoughts - to vent their wrath and exorcise their own psychological demons."<sup>74</sup> The dummy, he argues, is "an approximately life-sized wooden doll that is invested with life through the medium of the ventriloquist [...] [it] is a totemic miniature human that gives voice to or exposes the warring sides of the ventriloquist."<sup>75</sup> The dysfunctional nature of this relationship had a significant impact on later ventriloquist-driven horror narratives. Ghoulish echoes of it can be found in: Oswald Mitchells' crime thriller *The Dummy Talks* (1943), the 'The Glass Eye' (1957) episode of the anthology television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, both 'The Dummy' (1962) and 'Ceasar and Me' (1964) episodes of Rod Sterling's horror science fiction series *The Twilight Zone*, the 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy' (1990) episode of William Gaines's Gothic anthology series *Tales from the Crypt*, the 'The Puppet Show' (1997) episode of Joss Whedon's cult classic series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Mark Jones's revenge horror *Triloquist* (2008), amongst others.<sup>76</sup> Lindsay Shonteff's cult horror *Devil Doll* (1964) validates its "It walks. It talks. It kills"<sup>77</sup> tagline as a hypnotist utilises his dummy Hugo, a dummy that houses the soul of a previous victim, to commit further murders for financial gain. As T. S. Kord observes, *Devil Doll* "works extensively

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<sup>73</sup> Jacob Stein, "Senor Wences," *The American Scholar*, 65:3 (Summer 1996): 425.

<sup>74</sup> N. Norman, "Archie Andrews: The Rise and Fall of a Ventriloquist's Dummy," *The Independent*, November 26, 2005, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/archie-andrews-the-rise-and-fall-of-a-ventriloquist-s-dummy-516992.html>.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> It has also been the subject of parody, most notably perhaps in series four, episode twenty-two 'Krusty Gets Kancelled' (1993) of *The Simpsons*.

<sup>77</sup> *Devil Doll*, directed by Lindsay Shonteff, performances by Bryant Haliday, William Sylvester, and Yvonne Romain (1964; London: Galaworldfilm Productions, 2010), DVD.

with appearance and reality, casting Hugo as the film's 'evil'.<sup>78</sup> Ultimately however, he is revealed to be merely a "plaything of the devil"<sup>79</sup> as the considerably bigger evil of human greed is exposed. These narratives, as Mann contends, "often draw on the central conceit of *The Great Gabbo* to generate fear by eroding the division between a human ventriloquist and what should be a soulless vessel for their disembodied voice."<sup>80</sup> If the exact cause of the terror is then left unclear, the horror is merely strengthened.

A film that bridges the divide between the complex psychology of *The Great Gabbo* and the far-fetched technology of *The Devil-Doll* is *Dead of Night* (1945). Produced by British studio Ealing Studios, *Dead of Night's* anthology structure is comprised of five individual segments, the best known of which is perhaps its concluding tale, 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy'.<sup>81</sup> Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti 'The Ventriloquist's Dummy', as Staats observes, "immortalizes the devil doll – the puppet as a vessel of evil"<sup>82</sup> and is perhaps the most notorious, and earliest, example of a truly 'evil' dummy in horror cinema. The film's antagonist, puppet Hugo, learns to walk and talk without its operator's assistance, eventually becoming a violent force that drives his master to insanity. *Dead of Night's* principal contribution to horror cinema appears in the scene in which ventriloquist Maxwell Frere communicates through Hugo's voice, a scene that presents the puppet's "disembodied voice [...] [as] the locus of evil and criminality,"<sup>83</sup> an attribute that later depictions of the devilish ventriloquial dummy have highlighted. Victoria Nelson observes that "historically, Western puppet entertainments were always violent spectacles, as witness the standard pummellings of traditional Punch and Judy shows, which usually ended with Punch's onstage

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<sup>78</sup> Kord, *Little Horrors*, 136.

<sup>79</sup> Shonteff, *Devil Doll*.

<sup>80</sup> Mann, "They Don't Make 'Em Like That Anymore," 63.

<sup>81</sup> This format inspired Freddie Francis' anthology horror film *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* (1965) and Rod Serling's science fiction anthology television series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), among others. The other tales in *Dead of Night* are 'The Hearse Driver', 'The Christmas Party,' 'The Haunted Mirror,' and 'The Golfer's Story'.

<sup>82</sup> Staats, "Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll," 57.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

hanging and exit in a coffin.”<sup>84</sup> This violence is a trait that contemporary depictions of the malicious puppet in horror cinema have seemingly embraced. The violence of Punch and Judy however, is conventionally puppet to puppet, thus Hugo as “an autonomous entity who wreaks havoc on the people around him, bears the distinction of being the first puppet murderer of a human in a popular film.”<sup>85</sup> This distinction is significant, as it introduces the concept of puppet as a threat to people, a motif that has proved significant in contemporary adaptations of the monstrous ‘living’ doll. These maniacal figures drive home Robin Wood’s observation “that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for the recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror.”<sup>86</sup> These uncanny figures appear to flourish in horror cinema, indeed, as Loiselle observes, the genre is “filled with uncanny marionettes that inexplicably come to life and perform evil deeds of their own volition.”<sup>87</sup> The overriding fear at the heart of these earlier killer toy horror films, is, as Mann observes, “essentially a primal one, of something that artificially appears to think and feel literally coming to life and gaining a malevolent sentience.”<sup>88</sup> From the infamous Chucky of the *Child’s Play* (1988-2019) series, to Hugo in Steven M. Smith’s *The Doll Master* (2017), the depiction of puppets, dolls, and their kin, as autonomous beings that pose a real risk to their human counterparts is inescapable.

Aesthetically, a ventriloquist dummy is a logical vehicle for horror narratives, with its “mad, swivelling, psychotic eyes beneath arched eyebrows and that crude parody of a mouth (with painted teeth) that opens and shuts with a click [...] [as well as the] floppily articulated limbs that lend them the aspect of death.”<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, as Norman observes the dummy possesses that

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<sup>84</sup> Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Robin R. Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 21.

<sup>87</sup> Loiselle, *Theatricality in the Horror Film*, 80.

<sup>88</sup> Mann, “They Don’t Make ‘Em Like That Anymore,” 67.

<sup>89</sup> Norman, “Archie Andrews.”

trademark voice, the “high-pitched squawk that is [...] [arguably] one of the least pleasant sounds made by a human being.”<sup>90</sup> Yet, as Staats discerns, in horror cinema it is not merely the pitch that renders the dummy uncanny, rather its “most compelling vent act is [...] the obliteration of the puppet master as a coherent identity [...] it is unclear who is in control of whom.”<sup>91</sup> Released in 1978, *Magic*, directed by Hollywood staple Richard Attenborough, captures this perfectly. Adapted from William Goldman’s 1976 psychological thriller of the same name *Magic* centres upon the relationship between the grotesquely creepy ventriloquist dummy Fats and his intensely shy owner Corky.<sup>92</sup> This principal notion of a fractured ventriloquial identity is amplified in *Magic* for Anthony Hopkins skilfully portrays the roles of both ventriloquist and his dummy,<sup>93</sup> as Corky utilises Fats as “a foul-mouthed outlet for his own inherent violence.”<sup>94</sup> The tempestuous relationship between the pair reaches its acme when it is exposed that Corky is communicating with Fats without an audience present, and “it thus ceases to be a performance, and registers that he is losing his mind.”<sup>95</sup> As Laura Hubner perceives here “the Gothic tension is conveyed visually through the utilization of space,” as the viewer sees “through the open door from the bedroom to Fats sat before another open door – to the world outside.”<sup>96</sup> Fats, as ventriloquial dummy, straddles both the public and private sides of Corky’s life. Tension is developed through the awareness and dread that Corky’s psychosis will predictably be discovered. In *Magic*’s final scene Corky irrevocably severs ties with his chilling doppelgänger, and stabs himself, forever silencing the pair.

By the late 1970s the evil ventriloquist dummy was a firm fixture of horror cinema, these malevolent figures often giving literal voice to the suppressed feelings of their puppet masters. Indeed, despite the initial apparent vulnerability of the ventriloquial dummy, many evolve,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 60.

<sup>92</sup> Goldman also wrote the screenplay for the film.

<sup>93</sup> Hopkin’s central performance here foreshadows his later iconic role as cultured cannibal Hannibal Lecter in Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

<sup>94</sup> Eric Miller, “Magic (1978),” *Classic Horror*, April 3, 2008, [https://classic-horror.com/reviews/magic\\_1978](https://classic-horror.com/reviews/magic_1978).

<sup>95</sup> Laura Hubner, *Fairytale and Gothic Horror: Uncanny Transformations in Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 63.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

ultimately becoming more formidable, and more deceitful, than their masters. In horror cinema the figure of the puppet and puppet master are irrevocably intertwined, neither can survive as a coherent, singular, identity.

And so, to dolls. The 1980s saw a significant shift in the killer toy subgenre, previously governed by puppets and ventriloquist dummies, “inanimate objects that are traditionally designed to create the *illusion* of life,”<sup>97</sup> this decade’s horror output spotlighted malevolent dolls. Richard Ciupka’s slasher horror *Curtains* (1983) employs a porcelain doll as an omen of impending doom, whilst in Brendan Faulkner’s independent horror *Spookies* (1986) dolls are just part of a whole host of monstrous figures deployed by a wicked sorcerer to enact their will. It was the latter part of the decade though, specifically the release of two films, Stuart Gordon’s *Dolls* (1987) and Tom Holland’s *Child’s Play* (1988), that really transported the monstrous killer doll to the heart of the public imaginary. *Child’s Play*’s release sparked the subgenres most prevalent and durable cinematic franchise,<sup>98</sup> and thus, perhaps understandably, tends to outshine *Dolls* in discussions of 1980s ‘living’ doll horror. Influenced by this, a wave of B movies centred upon demonic dolls was released over the next decade. Notable examples include William Mim’s stalker horror *Death Doll* (1989), Maria Lease’s slasher horror *Dolly Dearest* (1991), Charles Band’s direct-to-video horror *Dollman vs. Demonic Toys* (1993), Steve White’s supernatural horror *Amityville Dollhouse* (1996), and Ted Nicolaou’s American horror movie *Ragdoll* (1999).

*Dolls* is something of a unique entry to the subgenre however, “in that the antiquated toys that serve as its antagonists are also its heroes.”<sup>99</sup> This notion of vengeful toy is present from the

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<sup>97</sup> Mann, “They Don’t Make ‘Em Like That Anymore,” 67.

<sup>98</sup> Along with Charles Band and Kenneth J. Hall’s American horror film series *Puppet Master* (1989 – 2022). The series, which centres upon a collection of anthropomorphic puppets who have been animated by ancient Egyptian magic, comprises of, to date, ten cinematic sequels alongside various reboot, crossover, and spinoff films, as well as several comic book series and a free-to-play multiplayer video game.

<sup>99</sup> Mann, “They Don’t Make ‘Em Like That Anymore,” 62.

very beginning. In the film's prologue Little Judy is made, by her unfeeling stepmother, Rosemary, to dispose of her treasured toy bear as they approach the Hartwicke residence. Irritated by this, Judy pictures the bear, now metamorphosed into a ferocious beast, devouring Rosemary and her heartless father. Whilst easily dismissed as mere childhood fantasy, this moment highlights the significant role that vengeful toys fulfil within the narrative. *Dolls* encourages the viewer, as Mann notes, "to cheer for the film's murderous dolls because they are lovingly-crafted playthings motivated solely by a desire to protect."<sup>100</sup> The suggestion that they possess a morality, however erroneous that morality may be, adds an additional dimension to the killer doll archetype presented to viewers thus far. *Dolls* can be read as an anti-consumerist allegory, that like *Child's Play*, utilises "toys as metaphors through which to lament various aspects of capitalist modernity; soulless mass-production, rampant materialism and the unfortunate development of the child consumer."<sup>101</sup> Yet the dolls of Gordon's film are not the glossy mass-produced figures of *Child's Play*, rather these ornate doppelgängers are previous human visitors of the Hartwicke residence, now metamorphosed into dolls as penance for their previous alleged indiscretions. These dolls are imbued with a sense of nostalgia absent in Holland's Good Guy doll. Through this nostalgia Gordon introduces to the doll narrative a sense of sentimentality that can be found in later depictions including John R. Leonetti's *Annabelle* (2014) and William Brent Bell's *The Boy* (2016).

From the film's title sequence, it is evident that the dolls within *Dolls* are something to be feared. Visual effects designer Robert Dawson, who had previously worked alongside Gordon on *Re-Animator* (1985), skilfully crafts an eerie sequence where "the credits appear alongside the disembodied heads of various dolls, both male and female, which have been positioned and lit in such a way that their faces are cast in a disquieting shadow, while their eyes seem to stare ominously into the distance."<sup>102</sup> In the film's opening scene an assembly of stranded motorists, seeking cover

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 62-63.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 68-69.

from a raging storm, find shelter in the Hartwicke mansion, the extravagant Gothic residence of dollmakers Hilary and Gabriel Hartwicke. Unbeknownst to these unexpected guests, the Hartwicke's intricately handcrafted dolls are alive and are most protective of their elderly owners. As night falls, and the rainstorm rages on, the dolls attack the visitors in increasingly complex and graphic ways. One visitor is employed by the dolls as a human battering ram, her head repetitively, and bloodily, smashed against a wall. Another is bitten, beaten, and stabbed repeatedly. The last, after destroying a Punch puppet, is inadvertently turned into one. The theatricality of all of these kills is overt, as Loiselle notes, "the powerful artifice of the vengeful dolls is always made manifest through closeups on oddly sneering porcelain faces, freakishly high-pitched voices and jerky stop-motion animation."<sup>103</sup> As Crystal Ponti discerns, the dolls in *Dolls* then are notable for their agency, the film "essentially cut the cord between human operator and wooden dummy and gave horror-movie fans one of their first forays into independently motivated dolls."<sup>104</sup> The prevailing legacy of *Dolls* is that it introduced dolls that were capable of agency and thought into the subgenre.

The demonic doll subgenre, a genre that traces its origins to Cecil M. Hepworth's trick film *The Doll's Revenge* (1907) - in which a young boy witnesses his previously destroyed sister's doll reassemble itself, before tearing him apart and devouring him - has flourished in recent decades.<sup>105</sup> As Rodriguez McRobbie observes, "the idea of a doll animated by devilish forces has wormed its way into popular culture"<sup>106</sup> to such an extent that, as David W. Kupferman concludes "there is

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<sup>103</sup> Loiselle, *Theatricality in the Horror Film*, 81.

<sup>104</sup> Crystal Ponti, "Child's Play and the Very Human Horror of Creepy Dolls," *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2018, [https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/11/childs-play-chucky-creepy-dolls-history/575374/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_content=edit-promo&utm\\_term=2018-11-10T12%3A00%3A19&utm\\_campaign=the-atlantic&utm\\_source=twitter](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/11/childs-play-chucky-creepy-dolls-history/575374/?utm_medium=social&utm_content=edit-promo&utm_term=2018-11-10T12%3A00%3A19&utm_campaign=the-atlantic&utm_source=twitter).

<sup>105</sup> Trick film refers to "a group of films popular in the first decade of the 20th century in which careful technical manipulation—substitution editing, double exposure, the use of scale models to shift perspective, stop motion animation and so on—was used to magical or comic effect. [...] The sudden appearance or disappearance of objects or people, sometimes in combination with pyrotechnical effects (explosions, smoke), was a common feature of the trick film." – "Trick Film," *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/hull.idm.oclc.org/display/10.1093/acref/9780199587261.001.0001/acref-9780199587261-e-0734?rsk=faAuby&result=1>.

<sup>106</sup> Rodriguez McRobbie, "The History of Creepy Dolls."

no shortage of killer dolls in the social imaginary.”<sup>107</sup> Contrary to Benjamin Poole’s assertion that “it is still rare for a movie to draw upon pediophobia,”<sup>108</sup> the killer doll is an established, and thriving, figure in contemporary horror cinema. Commenting on the construction of monstrosity in the contemporary Gothic, Fred Botting determines that these monstrous figures are largely no longer “terrifying objects of animosity expelled in the return to social and symbolic equilibrium.”<sup>109</sup> Rather, they are “sites of identification, sympathy, and self-recognition. Excluded figures once represented as malevolent, disturbed, or deviant monsters are rendered more humane.”<sup>110</sup> The ‘living’ doll is one such figure. As an archetype of the Gothic body, an abnormal ‘other’ the doll is abhuman. A term which Kelly Hurley defines as being “a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other.”<sup>111</sup> As part object, part being, a distortion of the norm which disrupts categorisation, it exists in-between states. As an abhuman being that spawns more than mere revulsion, the doll as doppelgänger is an atavistic figure that defies rationality, an uncontrolled, ostensibly monstrous ‘other’, one ripe for manipulation and incorporation into the horror genre.

As motion picture technology developed over the course of the twentieth century, eerie dolls became more aggressively homicidal. The number of horror films showcasing these macabre doppelgängers has subsequently skyrocketed, as Kord notes, “in 1900, they were a trickle. In 2000, they were a flood. Since then, they’ve become an avalanche.”<sup>112</sup> Their popularity is perhaps to be expected; after all this is a genre where the monster thrives, the supernatural prospers, the apparently living are revealed to be dead, and the seemingly inanimate come to life. Indeed, Peter

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<sup>107</sup> David W. Kupferman, “Toy Gory, or the Ontology of Chucky: Childhood and Killer Dolls”, in *Childhood, Science Fiction, and Pedagogy: Children Ex Machina*, eds. David W. Kupferman and Andrew Gibbons (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 60.

<sup>108</sup> Benjamin Poole, *Saw* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2014), 102

<sup>109</sup> Fred Botting, “Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines, and Black Holes” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 264.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3-4.

<sup>112</sup> Kord, *Little Horrors*, 3.



Hutchings praises killer doll horror narratives for exemplifying the rendering of “the inanimate as animate”<sup>113</sup> which he pinpoints as central to the genre. The sheer profusion of cinematic ‘living’ doll narratives arguably borders on cliché with many of these following the ominous tagline of 1987’s *Dolls*: “They walk. They talk. They kill.”<sup>114</sup>

These simulacra of living beings, these substitutes, or supplements for life itself, seem tailor-made for visual forms of media. Often the haunting aesthetic of the doll is enough to provoke a visceral reaction in audiences. Picture the leering porcelain figure of horror maestro Dario Argento’s classic *Deep Red* (1975), the auburn-haired ghostly visage in P. J. Woodside’s unimaginatively titled *The Creepy Doll* (2011), or the tableau of sinister dolls in Pascal Laugier’s thriller horror *Incident in a Ghostland* (2018). Occasionally these eerie visuals emerge in unexpected places, like in Roger Vadim’s wacky science fiction picture *Barbarella* (1968). Sometimes their slogans pack more of a punch than the doll itself, as is the case with Talky Tina of *The Twilight Zone*’s ‘Living Doll’ episode – “My name is Talky Tina and I’m going to kill you.”<sup>115</sup> Anne Billson proposes that “dolls are arguably more sinister in diminutive form” for “even when they’re the passive poppets used in witchcraft (in *The House That Dripped Blood*, 1971) or voodoo (*I Walked with a Zombie*, 1943, or *The Plague of Zombies*, 1966)”<sup>116</sup> they still evoke terror. As Christy Lemire succinctly surmises then:

In the pantheon of creepy dolls – from Talky Tina in *The Twilight Zone* to Chucky in the *Child’s Play* movies to Annabelle in *The Conjuring* – it’s often the idea of the inanimate object coming to life and wreaking bloody havoc that’s more frightening than the actual

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<sup>113</sup> Peter Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 106.

<sup>114</sup> *Dolls*, directed by Stuart Gordon, performances by Ian Patrick Williams, Carolyn Purdy-Gordon, and Carrie Lorraine (1987; Ontario: Empire International Pictures, 2005), DVD.

<sup>115</sup> *The Twilight Zone*, season 5, episode 6, “Living Doll,” written by Jerry Sohl, aired November 1, 1963, on CBS. Prime Video.

<sup>116</sup> Anne Billson, “From Hugo to Chucky and Annabelle – Who is the Scariest Doll of Them All?,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/apr/20/from-hugo-to-chucky-and-annabelle-who-is-the-scariest-doll-of-them-all>.

execution. It's a tricky thing to pull off: drawing shivers from turning a childhood plaything into something truly menacing vs. eliciting giggles at the sheer silliness of the proposition.<sup>117</sup>

Often the doll's sheer presence and/or their macabre aesthetic is enough to provoke a visceral, and/or affective response in the viewer. Granting agency or autonomy, however, can render the potential threat farcical.

The uncanny sensation elicited by disturbing dolls risks depreciation if the figure becomes an overused cliché. As Yi Sencindiver observes:

As a recognisable cultural trope, the living doll is susceptible to a calcification into a tired cliché, a trivialisation aggravated by the derisive effects of parody. It proves harder to elicit an uncanny effect by figuring the living doll and related motifs as an incongruous element threatening to destabilise their given contexts in as much as this convention itself becomes a familiar, fossilised topos; that is, the viewer's or reader's structure of assumptions is modified to accommodate and expect this very feature.<sup>118</sup>

This phenomenon is epitomised by the increasing range of commercialized products capitalising on the creepy doll subgenre. Consumers can now purchase a range of creepy doll colouring

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<sup>117</sup> Christy Lemire, "The Boy," Roger Ebert, January 22, 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-boy-2016>.

<sup>118</sup> Yi Sencindiver, "The Doll's Uncanny Soul," 126.

books,<sup>119</sup> dress up in novelty costumes,<sup>120</sup> and learn “revenge therapy”<sup>121</sup> from *The Little Voodoo Kit* (1996), a self-help manual “for the over-stressed”<sup>122</sup> that includes instructions on “correct pinning technique.”<sup>123</sup> This thesis is not, nor does it endeavour to be, a complete record of dolls in contemporary horror literature, film, and television, rather it aims to provide an overview of the extent to which they appear in the horror genre, and more importantly of their form and function.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Including: Elizabeth Croft’s *Voodoo Doll Coloring Book* (2021), Daydream Art’s *Creepy Collections: Forgotten Dolls & Discarded Things Coloring Book* (2022), Atiqur Rahman’s *Adorable Creepy Dolls Coloring Book for Adults* (2023), Creative Jamila’s *Creepy Fantasy Kawaii Horror Goth Doll Coloring Book* (2023), DesignINKZ’s *Dreadful Dolls: A Haunting Coloring Book of Creepy Dolls* (2023), Gascoigne JS’s *Sinister Dolls Adult Coloring Book* (2023), Shadow of Lisandra’s *Freaky Dolls Coloring Book For Adults* (2023), and The Big Momo’s *The Night of Creepy Dolls Cute and Creepy Coloring Book* (2023), amongst others.

<sup>120</sup> As of the 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2023, popular British fancy-dress manufacturer and retailer Smiffys stocks two iterations of a ‘broken doll’ adult costume on their online store, alongside ‘broken rag doll’, ‘damaged doll’, ‘horror doll’, ‘porcelain doll’, and ‘voodoo doll’ fancy-dress outfits for adults. Movie tie-ins are also supplied with three *Annabelle* doll-themed adult costumes, two *Annabelle* style wigs, and one *Annabelle* lookalike mask available to purchase. Consumers can also find Chucky masks and a wig, alongside costumes for the entire family, including the pet. Similar outfits for children are also available with ‘broken doll’, ‘porcelain doll’, and ‘voodoo doll’ lines. It appears that consumer demand for these macabre doll themed outfits is strong.

<sup>121</sup> J. P. Poupette, *The Little Voodoo Kit* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996) front cover.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>124</sup> Those readers interested in further examples of dolls in horror cinema and television should consult Australian horror writer Robert Hood’s extensive ‘Evil Doll Movie List’ on his personal website an “ongoing list of movies and TV show episodes that feature dolls of various kinds that display unnatural life and (usually) an evil tendency.” Undead Backbrain, “Evil Doll Movie List,” Accessed February 3, 2020, <https://roberthood.net/blog/index.php/movielists/evil-doll-movie-list/>.

## Terms and Scope

Before considering the doll's position within horror, the term 'doll' itself warrants exploration. "An image of a human being (commonly of a child or lady) used as a plaything"<sup>125</sup> is the primary definition of 'doll' that will be utilised here. This study considers the figure of the 'living' doll within contemporary horror narratives, and it is necessary to define what the phrase 'living' doll means within this context. The terms 'animate doll' and "living' doll' are used interchangeably here and largely equate to the same concept, an inanimate figure that appears animate. Furthermore, because this study examines fictional depictions of dolls, on occasion, authors may utilise metaphor, and alternate descriptors for what is essentially still a doll.<sup>126</sup> This study does, on occasion, examine the aesthetic framing of the 'living' doll figure within selected visual narratives where pertinent yet it is not the focus here.<sup>127</sup> It is not the intention of this study to put forward a definitive definition of what an animate doll within a horror context looks like, rather it will examine how these figures are depicted, drawing parallels where appropriate, to determine the type of form these figures take, and more significantly how they function within horror.

This study employs the concept of anthropomorphism, following David Punter and Glennis Byron's definition of it in the Gothic as: "a subspecies of animism, whereby the inanimate is not merely invested with animate qualities but specifically 'impersonates' the human."<sup>128</sup> Within the Gothic this is perhaps most vividly signified through the reanimation of the living dead as typified in George Romero's zombie cult classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), but it also applies, as this study will demonstrate, to the figure of the 'living' doll. Discussion of animate dolls

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<sup>125</sup> "Doll, *n.*," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed November 3, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/56597?rskey=y3EXv8&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>126</sup> Puppet, dummy, marionette, mannequin, statue etc. On occasion there is also crossover between these figures. Chucky, for example, utilises the vent act associated with ventriloquism despite not being a ventriloquist dummy.

<sup>127</sup> Other scholars are invited to develop such a project and thus fill this gap.

<sup>128</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 285.

inevitably leads to connections with and a potential much lengthier analysis of the ‘human double’ in the Gothic. This a broader classification, which might include androids, clowns, cyborgs, golems, homunculi, mannequins, mummies, puppets, scarecrows, simulacra, statues, substitute or surrogate humans, twins, and wax figures, and a whole host of other assorted ‘doubles’. This collection is vast, the figures linked “by the disconcerting characteristic of appearing like ‘mummified living beings’ who invite us to acknowledge them as figures of ourselves. They are human beings of sorts, capable of provoking a primal uneasiness. The nature of their presence is in fact quite vivid, though ghostly at the same time.”<sup>129</sup> Dolls, puppets, mannequins, and increasingly robots, “collaborate in constituting the constellation of material and inorganic bodies – anthropomorphic when they are not zoomorphic, and of generally reduced dimensions – that are manoeuvrable.”<sup>130</sup>

Many of these figures are inherently Gothic. Statues as Kenneth Gross notes tend “to have the look of a ghost, a galvanized corpse, a monster.”<sup>131</sup> Norman posits “that ventriloquists use dummies to express their darkest thoughts – to vent their wrath and exorcise their own psychological demons.”<sup>132</sup> Franz Boas moreover suggests that wax figures maintain a “ghastly impression” that is “too close an approach to nature.”<sup>133</sup> This ghastly impression was most notably and skilfully employed by Marie Tussaud in her 1802 London exhibition of infamous murderers ‘The Chamber of Horrors.’ Yi Sencindiver likewise stresses these uncanny figures’ aptness to the genre, “as living matter, demonically possessed, or a carrier of ancient curses, the animate doll and related motifs of statues, puppets, automata, golems, and portraits that come to life have been

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<sup>129</sup> Chiara Cappelletto, “The Puppet’s Paradox: An Organic Prosthesis,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59/60 (Spring-Autumn 2011): 325.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1993), 114.

<sup>132</sup> Norman, “Archie Andrews.”

<sup>133</sup> Ira Jacknis, “Franz Boas and Exhibits: On the Limitations of the Museum Method of Anthropology”, in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, ed. George W. Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 102.

amenable to the Gothic mode.”<sup>134</sup> To consider all of the above figures, alongside dolls, is not possible within the confines of this study. Indeed, a project that aimed to tackle all human-like simulacra would necessitate significantly more space than is provided here. As such, within this study discussion will be restricted to dolls and specifically, the utilisation of these effigies of the human form for horrific purposes.

In *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch*, Paul Wells determines that “central to the horror genre's identity is the configuration of the 'monster'.”<sup>135</sup> Specifically, “the monstrous element in the horror text” which “is usually an interrogation of the amorphous nature of evil, or an address of the limits of the human condition; physically, emotionally and psychologically”<sup>136</sup> is played out through the central “conflict between good and evil.”<sup>137</sup> These binary oppositions “are addressed through one of the dominant motifs of the horror text: the doppelgänger.”<sup>138</sup> Wells defines the doppelgänger as that which humanity opposes, a “nemesis either through the opposition of an individual and a monster or by the exposure of the two competing sides of an individual – normally, one rational and civilised, the other uncontrolled and irrational, often more primal and atavistic.”<sup>139</sup> The doppelgänger itself is a Gothic stock character: Frankenstein's creature, the Byronic vampire, Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, and Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde spring immediately to mind. These doubles are the very manifestation of anxiety over transgression for they showcase the horrors apparent when the self is physically divided. As Linda Dryden argues in her influential text on the Gothic doppelgänger, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles*, “it is rare to find a tale of doubles or doubling that does not contain strong elements of Gothic horror and inevitable death. The double is ... evidence of a Gothic,

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<sup>134</sup> Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll's Uncanny Soul,” 106.

<sup>135</sup> Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London: Wallflower, 2000), 27.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 31.

supernatural force at large that brings with it death and destruction.”<sup>140</sup> The ‘living’ doll figures examined within this study are the embodiment of this, uncanny objects that disrupt binary distinctions of “visible/invisible, present/absent, alive/dead, here/there ... [that transgress] boundaries as well as binaries.”<sup>141</sup>

There are several other parameters that should be acknowledged regarding this thesis, the first of which is time frame. The key texts examined within this thesis are all contemporary, specifically post 1967. The 1950s, as T.S. Kord observes, was “the decade in which the horror genre moved from the creature feature to attaching a human face to the concept of Evil.”<sup>142</sup> By the 1960s this inclination to highlight a very human kind of horror was well on its way to being established. Furthermore, as acknowledged earlier in the introduction, the 1960s saw a resurgence in monstrous doll narratives that paved the way, in terms of both form and function, for later adaptations. Moreover, these contemporary narratives, even more so than earlier additions to the killer doll subgenre, succinctly reflect the traumas and anxieties of their human counterparts, and thus, of our contemporary society. Whilst, at points, this thesis will reference earlier texts, both to contextualise and to demonstrate variety, its primary focus is on contemporary ‘living’ doll horror narratives.

The second parameter that needs to be acknowledged is the study’s anglophone focus. This thesis considers visual media produced by the American and British film and television industries, alongside novels and short stories written by American and British authors. The anglophone focus of this project is conscious. Given that this is the first full-length study of dolls

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<sup>140</sup> Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde and Wells*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 38.

<sup>141</sup> Ruth Heholt, “Unstable Landscapes: Affect, Representation and a Multiplicity of Hauntings,” in *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, ed. Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 13.

<sup>142</sup> Kord, *Little Horrors*, 1.

and horror, it is logical to first consider the two countries that have contributed most prevalently to this emerging subgenre, and which have had the most impact upon later depictions.<sup>143</sup> Through limiting the geographical range of texts considered, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive examination of how the ‘living’ doll subgenre has developed in a specifically English-speaking context. However, such an approach is not, of course, without its limitations. Noteworthy examples of ‘living’ doll horror films produced elsewhere include: Benito Alazraki’s Mexican horror *The Curse of the Doll People* (1961),<sup>144</sup> Mario Bava’s Italian Gothic horror *Kill, Baby, Kill* (1966),<sup>145</sup> Roland Emmerich’s West German techno-horror *Joey* (1985),<sup>146</sup> Umberto Lenzi’s Italian horror *Ghosthouse* (1988),<sup>147</sup> Rene Cardona III’s cult Mexican horror *Vacations of Terror* (1989),<sup>148</sup> Rodrigo Blaas’ Spanish computer-animated short *Alma* (2009), Pascal Laugier’s French-Canadian horror *Ghostland* (2018),<sup>149</sup> and Rocky Soraya’s Indonesian horror *Sabrina* (2018). Macabre dolls likewise populate the pages of horror literature across the world. André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), an iconic French surrealist novel, brings the reader’s attention to that peculiarly childish “mania for taking out their dolls’ eyes to see *what’s there* behind them.”<sup>150</sup> In volume ten of the *Horror World of Junji Ito* collection, *House of the Marionettes* (1997),<sup>151</sup> Japanese manga artist Junji Ito skilfully blurs the prescribed boundaries between puppet and human. Lee So-Young adeptly utilises the doll as a vehicle for horror in his Korean comic series *Horror Collector* (2007-2010) where “the protagonist Evilice, a wealthy, beautiful collector of items used for acts of murder, attempts the resurrection of the spirit of Elizabeth Bathory, who sealed herself inside of a doll through a blood bath.”<sup>152</sup> These non-western narratives, and other examples like them, need to be studied within the discourse on dolls and horror, however there is not the space nor scope within this project to do

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<sup>143</sup> No doubt, due in part, to the large budgets that their film studios can access.

<sup>144</sup> Released to the Spanish market as *Muñecos Infernales*.

<sup>145</sup> Released to the Italian market as *Operazione Paura*.

<sup>146</sup> Also known as *Making Contact*.

<sup>147</sup> Released to the Italian market as *La Casa 3*.

<sup>148</sup> Released to the Spanish market as *Vacaciones de Terror*.

<sup>149</sup> Also known as *Incident in a Ghostland*.

<sup>150</sup> André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 89.

<sup>151</sup> Also known as *House of Puppets* and *Marionette Mansion*.

<sup>152</sup> Blackmore, “A Puppet’s Parody of Joy,” 36.



so satisfactorily. The intention of this project is to initiate a lengthier critical discussion on dolls and horror, which others, particularly those approaching the topic from a non-Western perspective, are encouraged to elaborate upon.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> This work would reflect the current (and much needed) broader move within Gothic studies to decolonialise the genre, as typified most recently by the publication of *The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic* (2023).

## **Methodology**

The principal methodology employed by this thesis is in-depth textual analysis of the core texts. Texts, both literary and visual, have been selected on a case-by-case basis, and their narrative structure, plot, textual details, and characterisation are examined in line with the thematic focus of each chapter. Where pertinent, this textual analysis is utilised alongside the study of an author, director, or creator's oeuvre, consideration of the sociohistorical context in which the text was produced, and, in the case of visual texts particularly, analysis of their critical reception or marketing materials. On occasion, film-specific methodology is also employed when considering aspects specific to visual media such as editing, scoring, and mise-en-scène. There is also an element of cultural studies here, particularly when considering artefacts such as eBay listings or promotional websites alongside more traditional texts. This diverse methodological approach mirrors the interdisciplinary nature of this project. Through detailed textual analysis of the corpus texts, this study endeavours to determine the significant narrative and thematic elements of 'living' doll horror narratives, whilst also considering significant philosophical and psychological issues, in order to survey how these aspects combine within the Gothic sphere to eerie effect.

This thesis explores how the figure of the 'living' doll manifests in a range of contemporary Gothic texts. It is concerned with both the aesthetic depiction of these figures, with their form and function, and significantly, with what they represent. This representation is not limited to one restricting definition, rather, as this study will show, within a horror context the 'living' doll figure eschews easy categorisation, exists in the margins, and is subject to perpetual refashioning. Thus, a methodological approach which is not merely open toward, but aims for such scope, is most fitting here. Elfriede Fürsich notes that "it is not the goal of a textual analysis to uncover the one 'true' or even 'hidden' meaning of a text but to offer a variety of possible readings of the examined

material.”<sup>154</sup> Textual analysis is, as Roland Barthes suggests, much more concerned with exploration than determination:

Textual analysis does not try to *describe* the structure of a work. It does not aim to record a structure, but rather to produce a moving structuration of the text (a structuration which displaces itself from reader to reader throughout the length of History). It aims to remain within the signifying volume of the work, within its *signifying*. Textual analysis does not seek to know what determines a text (what brings it together as the final term of causality) but rather how it breaks out and disperses itself.<sup>155</sup>

In line with this, this study emphasises the sheer wealth of macabre doll horror narratives, and endeavours to determine the significance of both this profusion, and, of the infamous examples, like Annabelle and Chucky, that have seemingly outshone their, in many respects, equally horrifying, contemporaries. The key narratives examined within this study embrace a considerable range of themes, motifs, and issues, and this is testament to the richness and relevance of the contemporary Gothic. This study takes a thematic approach to analysing the ‘living’ doll figure within contemporary horror, considering the doll as consumed object, fetishized object, memorialised object, and haunted object, respectively.

Due to the difficulties presented by the overlapping genres of Gothic and horror, and in defining the doll figure within this space that thrives on unstable boundaries and evolving monsters, potential suitable texts have been selected on a case-by-case basis. A variety of approaches have been used to discover ‘living’ doll horror narratives, and from this determine key

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<sup>154</sup> Elfriede Fürsich, “Analysing Text”, in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies Volume 7*, ed. Fabienne Darling-Wolf (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 1.

<sup>155</sup> Roland Barthes, “Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Poe,” trans. Donald G. Marshall, *Poe Studies (1971-1985)*, 10:1 (June 1977): 2.

texts, including thorough trawls of internet databases, search engines, and published catalogues, exploring recommendations from peers and colleagues within the field, and analysing the limited secondary resources on the topic. Within the confines of this thesis, it is impossible to give each example of the 'living' doll subgenre equal weight. Yet, as Tzvetan Todorov concludes, studies of genre "[do] not require us to observe every instance of a phenomenon in order to describe it [...]. We actually deal with a relatively limited number of cases, from them we deduce a general hypothesis, and we verify this hypothesis by other cases, correcting (or rejecting) it as needs be."<sup>156</sup> The core texts examined within this study have been selected on this basis.

In his essay 'On Décor' (1918) surrealist poet Louis Aragon detailed how everyday objects are energised through the medium of film, how through cinema "each inanimate object becomes a living thing."<sup>157</sup> This is certainly the case for dolls within the horror genre; they lurk in the shadows, prowl haunted spaces, and terrorise their human counterparts. On occasion their presence is altogether more passive: a slow camera pan to an abandoned doll in horror cinema has almost become shorthand for this horror, their very presence establishing an eerie atmosphere regardless of agency. Indeed, as Paraic O'Donnell observes, "a discarded doll might end up on the cover of a crime paperback, a drab emblem of sullied innocence."<sup>158</sup> In contrast, the 'living' doll texts selected for this study showcase a much more active threat, for within the key texts selected here the 'living' doll figure plays a central role.

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<sup>156</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 4.

<sup>157</sup> Louis Aragon, "On Décor", in *French Film Theory and Criticism, vol.1, 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 167. The same can be said of literature, although it is less overt.

<sup>158</sup> O'Donnell, "The Dollmaker by Nina Allan review."

## Concerning Genre, Gothic and/or Horror

The Gothic is a complex, changeable, and unruly mode. A mode, continually haunted by its own past, that since its inception, has routinely evolved. The earliest Gothic narratives, as Clive Bloom observes, dealt at their core, “in the unspoken, the difficult, and the painful”<sup>159</sup> and this preoccupation remains at the macabre heart of the contemporary Gothic. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989) Frederic Jameson famously denounced the Gothic to be a mere reworking of a “boring and exhausted paradigm.”<sup>160</sup> Conversely the Gothic today is a pervasive beast. It saturates popular culture to such an extent that “the language and imagery of the Gothic are now ubiquitous,”<sup>161</sup> while certain incidents and experiences have become ‘Gothicised’ “from basic experiences of the uncanny, to political terrors, to national festivals and traditions, the Gothic can be seen to form a unique part of personal and cultural expression.”<sup>162</sup> Challenging Jameson, Gina Wisker sustains that the genre “is far from worn out, dissipated, merely popularist trimmings and trappings,”<sup>163</sup> it has become instead, mainstream. Spooner reiterates this, noting that the Gothic “has never been so popular” for “Gothic narratives, artefacts, products and images continued to hold Western audiences’ attention in the new millennium, and, indeed, increased their range and impact, moving far beyond the niche interests of horror fans to become the stuff of the mainstream.”<sup>164</sup> Punter and Byron likewise note that it is “clear that the issue of the Gothic is alive (if not entirely well) in western cultures in the early twenty-first century, in the form of popular ‘Goth’ culture as well as, for example, in the apparently endless remaking and

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<sup>159</sup> Clive Bloom, *Gothic Histories: The Taste for Terror, 1764 to the Present* (London: Continuum, 2010), 4.

<sup>160</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 288.

<sup>161</sup> Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville. “Living Gothic”, in *The Gothic and the Everyday: Living Gothic*, eds. Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Gina Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings and Vampire Kisses* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4.

<sup>164</sup> Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2.

reshaping of vampire myth in literature and film.”<sup>165</sup> The Gothic has, as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben conclude, established its place in the popular imaginary, “Gothic has permanently emerged from the crepuscular cultural unconscious into the brightly lit mainstream.”<sup>166</sup>

Likewise, the last four decades has seen an explosion of academic criticism on the Gothic in all its widespread practices and manifestations. This movement, Jerold Hogle and Andrew Smith suggest, has “collectively made the Gothic come alive (like Frankenstein’s creature) as an important, multi-layered, and profoundly symbolic scheme for dealing with Western culture’s most fundamental fears and concerns.”<sup>167</sup> Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville’s fittingly subtitled edited collection *The Gothic and the Everyday: Living Gothic* (2014) is an excellent illustration of this which attests to both the thriving state and pertinence of the genre. In the introduction to their collection, they assert that “the Gothic has never been more alive than it is today. Like a contagion, of late, it has travelled across cultural and media landscapes to permeate even the most banal aspects of everyday living.”<sup>168</sup> It has matured well beyond its literary origins to become “a perspective on the world that shapes our sense of experience and identity.”<sup>169</sup> As both a ubiquitous and commonplace object, the doll is particularly suited to exemplifying such a perspective.

Commenting on the genre’s post-millennial presence, Spooner discerns that the “Gothic has adapted and changed with the times and it is unclear why this process should now end.”<sup>170</sup> This tenacious adaptation is one of the reasons as to why the Gothic is perhaps best viewed then

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<sup>165</sup> Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, xix.

<sup>166</sup> Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, “The (Mis)Shapes of Neo-Victorian Gothic: Continuations, Adaptations, Transformations” in *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, eds. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 1.

<sup>167</sup> Jerold Hogle and Andrew Smith, “Revisiting the Gothic and Theory: An Introduction,” *Gothic Studies*, 11:1 (May 2009), 1.

<sup>168</sup> Piatti-Farnell and Beville, “Living Gothic,” 1.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>170</sup> Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, 10.

as a mode or style, rather than as a defined genre. Indeed, as Botting notes, any attempt to neatly compartmentalise the Gothic is problematic, as “the diffusion of Gothic forms and figures over more than two centuries make the definition of a homogenous generic category exceptionally difficult.”<sup>171</sup> A concrete definition of ‘Gothic’ remains, as Misha Kavka observes, “notoriously difficult to pin down”<sup>172</sup> for it is, as Maggie Kilgour suggests, “as difficult to define as any Gothic ghost.”<sup>173</sup> This study views the Gothic, in line with Punter and Byron as a ‘textual body’ as “a staggering, limping, lurching form akin to the monsters it so frequently describes.”<sup>174</sup>

Rather than standing as a distinct genre then, the Gothic blurs boundaries, existing both within, and alongside other genres,<sup>175</sup> and applicable to non-narrative forms,<sup>176</sup> while concomitantly showcasing distinctly Gothic themes, tropes, and concerns. Though reflection on these commonalities is critical, it is important not to fall into an analysis which “devolves into a cataloguing of stock characters and devices,”<sup>177</sup> which is potentially limiting and ignores the multifaceted nature of the genre. Instead, the appearance of these distinct themes, tropes, and concerns, should be considered as an indicator of the Gothic, rather than a definition, one which when employed correctly, enables clear, succinct identification in an otherwise murky space. As such, instead of adhering to any limiting definition, this thesis considers how the figure of the monstrous ‘living’ doll operates within the Gothic mode. Thus, this study highlights aspects of the Gothic that are central to the monstrous doll’s portrayal in contemporary narratives. Within the Gothic the doll figure operates similarly, blurring boundaries of in/humanity, and shifting its form to reflect cultural anxieties. Moreover, when considering the aesthetics of the genre, the figure of

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<sup>171</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 14.

<sup>172</sup> Misha Kavka, “The Gothic on Screen”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 210.

<sup>173</sup> Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.

<sup>174</sup> Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, xix.

<sup>175</sup> Such as horror, fantasy, science, and speculative fiction.

<sup>176</sup> Such as fashion, art, music, and architecture.

<sup>177</sup> Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 4.

the porcelain doll endures as an iconic Gothic image, akin to a mist-covered graveyard or caped vampire.

Horror, likewise, is an evolving genre fixated upon “slippery categories and tenuous oppositions”<sup>178</sup> which recurrently, as Gregory A. Waller observes, “defines and redefines, clarifies and obscures the relationship between the human and the monstrous, the normal and the aberrant, the sane and the mad, the natural and the supernatural, the conscious and the unconscious, the daydream and the nightmare, the civilized and the primitive.”<sup>179</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen determines that monstrous figures are born “at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence.”<sup>180</sup> More often than not the monstrous threat emerges at this contentious border between the human and inhuman, whether that be the border between man and beast in the case of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1931) or *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), between good and evil in the case of *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) or *The Exorcist* (1973) or the border between artificial being and human doppelgänger in the case of the ‘living’ doll narratives examined within this study.

There is substantial overlap between the Gothic and horror genres, that is echoed in the ways in which the terms ‘Gothic’ and ‘horror’ are employed, sometimes interchangeably. At times this distinction comes down to publishing or marketing conventions and within this study certain texts also fall into the realm of weird fiction.<sup>181</sup> Reflecting this commonality this thesis draws upon

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<sup>178</sup> Gregory A. Waller, “Introduction”, in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>181</sup> Weird fiction, likewise, avoids easy categorisation, it “is not constant through time, but changeable and adaptable. The genre and its canonical works support, reread, and rewrite each other” – Michael Cisco, *Weird Fiction: A Genre Study* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 4. Weird fiction then is perhaps best defined as what it is not as well as what it is, “it is supernatural fiction, but it is not Fantasy [...] It is horror fiction, but it does not depend on real-life



both Gothic and horror criticism where pertinent, employing theoretical frameworks from the two on a case-by-case basis. A core parallel between the two, lies in their intention to induce both fear and anxiety, and it is a trait that the monstrous 'living' dolls examined within this study so eerily embody. Furthermore, as the Gothic genre evolved, the term 'Gothic' "lost all connotation of 'medieval', and became a synonym for the grotesque, ghastly, and violently supernatural or superhuman in fiction,"<sup>182</sup> thus further amalgamating the two.

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horrors, such as murder or torture. The horror of weird fiction is derived from the implications of a de-territorialization of ordinary experience, insofar as the ordinary is fetishized as 'reality'." – Cisco, *Weird Fiction*, 7.

<sup>182</sup> Varma. *The Gothic Flame*, 13.

## The Uncanny and 'Living' Dolls

A key theory employed by this thesis is psychoanalysis, specifically the uncanny. Analysis of the 'living' doll figure in literary and visual narratives necessitates consideration of Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny*. His pivotal essay on the subject, published in 1919, remains one of the key tenets of horror criticism, and the intervening century has done little to lessen its pertinence. Psychoanalysis is something that Gothic and horror scholars alike regularly draw on, but it is also the subject of much debate, with some regarding it as outdated and inadequate.<sup>183</sup> Horror critic Alison Peirse takes an alternate stance, defending her use of psychoanalysis in the introduction to *After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film*, "I refuse to reject psychoanalysis as a useful mechanism for understanding some of the address of some of the films in this book. Some films are crying out to be psychoanalysed."<sup>184</sup> Brigid Cherry likewise refuses to discard it, stating that psychoanalytic theory is most beneficial when its central concepts are applied "carefully and selectively in order to explore the nuances of particular horror films."<sup>185</sup> The creep of psychoanalytic theory into horror criticism is such that it is, as Noël Carroll notes, now "unavoidable in discussing the genre."<sup>186</sup> Horror's employment of the uncanny is conscious, as Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Amy M. Davis note:

In order to make itself accessible to audiences while nonetheless maintaining its position within the worlds of the uncanny and the fantastical [...] [horror] uses a traditional narrative structure to bridge the gap which allows the imagery it presents – imagery which is replete with the uncanny, the grotesque, and the bizarre – to be simultaneously unsettling

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<sup>183</sup> Sharon Tay argues that a psychoanalytic approach to Gothic texts is inherently limiting, for "whatever historical, aesthetic and analytical developments the genre undertakes that may suggest a transgression of the psychoanalytic framework get ignored." - Sharon Tay, "Constructing a Feminist Cinematic Genealogy: The Gothic Woman's Film beyond Psychoanalysis," *Women: A Cultural Review*, 14:3 (2003), 268.

<sup>184</sup> Alison Peirse, *After Dracula: The 1930s Horror Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 10.

<sup>185</sup> Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London: Routledge, 2009), 102.

<sup>186</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 168.

to the audience yet still acceptable enough that the mainstream audience will watch and enjoy the film.<sup>187</sup>

The uncanny is employed within this study, not as its sole theoretical framework, rather as a means of identifying and comprehending the horror elicited by a doll that appears inert yet is, in some ways, portrayed as 'living'.

Psychoanalysis, specifically in its Freudian form, has prominent parallels with the Gothic. This is something that many critics have noted, with William Patrick Day considering them to be “‘cousins,’”<sup>188</sup> and highlighting the thematic similarities between the two, “for Freud, dreams are the expression of wishes unacknowledged in waking life; the Gothic fantasy is the expression of the fears and desires created, but unacknowledged, by conventional culture.”<sup>189</sup> These fears and desires manifest in a multitude of forms, within the context of this thesis they are most evident in the figure of the fetish doll. The uncanny is seemingly at home within the Gothic, with writers frequently employing many of its tropes, “destabilising fictional characters, spaces and readings, enacting confusion, dread and apprehension.”<sup>190</sup> Wisker concludes that the uncanny is thus “a tool of the Gothic” which “reveals what is concealed and unexpected: those alternative versions of self, of relationships, home and family, which relate to everyday ‘reality’. It opens the ways for energies that might burst out or intrude on and threaten everyday life. What results is a projection of something repressed, embodied in a demon spirit, ghost, monster or disruptive energies.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Amy M. Davis, “The Uncanny and Mannequins: The Dreamlike Qualities of Two Italian Gothic Films, *Il mullion delle donne di pietra* and *Lisa e il diavolo*”, in *Dreamscapes In Italian Cinema*, ed. Francesco Pascuzzi and Bryan Cracchiolo (Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 22.

<sup>188</sup> William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 179.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

<sup>190</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 15.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*.

Freud describes the uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,”<sup>192</sup> determining that “*Unheimlich* is clearly the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, *vertraut*, and it seems obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar.”<sup>193</sup> Yet, for something to be merely unknown is not enough, for “not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening [...] Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny.”<sup>194</sup> This explanation, as John Jervis suggests, “reminds us that [...] [the uncanny] is first and foremost a sensation, a feeling, a shudder of apprehension or fear. It disturbs deeply held, taken-for-granted assumptions about what is real and unreal, or imaginary, about the world, and the entities within it; whether these entities are dead or alive, animate or inanimate, natural or artificial, self or other.”<sup>195</sup> On the nature of the uncanny, Freud affirms that “there is no doubt that this belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread,” and yet “the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general [...] One would like to know the nature of this common nucleus, which allows us to distinguish the ‘uncanny’ within the field of the frightening.”<sup>196</sup> Gaby Wood acutely summaries this phenomena as “the feeling that arises when there is an ‘intellectual uncertainty’ about the borderline between the lifeless and the living.”<sup>197</sup> Freud defined horror, as Linda Badley clarifies, “in terms of the irrational ‘gut level’ fear, the uncanny [...] inspired by certain images and experiences in which the subject recognizes a repressed memory from childhood or an undiscovered aspect of the self.”<sup>198</sup> One power of the horror genre is to be found in its capacity to conjure seemingly forgotten memories, to make recognisable again that which was once suppressed.

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<sup>192</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 124.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 124-125.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>195</sup> John Jervis, “Uncanny Presences”, in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, ed. Jo Collins and John Jervis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 11.

<sup>196</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 123.

<sup>197</sup> Gaby Wood, *Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2002), xiv.

<sup>198</sup> Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 11.

Waxwork figures, artificial dolls, omens, automatons, alter egos, “severed limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm,”<sup>199</sup> and the double “in all its nuances and manifestations”<sup>200</sup> are all put forward by Freud as uncanny exemplars. In general, anything “credited [...] with independent activity” such as “feet that dance by themselves” would be deemed “highly uncanny.”<sup>201</sup> Within a horror context, this independent activity is frequently seen when an object, particularly those figures that mimic humanity, gains ‘life’ or at least, a semblance of it. Within horror cinema this animation of the inhuman, if not executed well, risks unsettling the viewer. In these cases, the inherent uncanniness of the object is lessened. The uncanny is also inherently connected to death, with “dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts”<sup>202</sup> considered “the acme of the uncanny,”<sup>203</sup> with “the crown of the uncanny [...] [being awarded] to the idea of being buried alive, only apparently dead.”<sup>204</sup> Terry Castle suggests that “The Uncanny” is “first and foremost a sort of theme-index: an obsessional inventory of eerie fantasies, motifs, and effects, an itemized tropology of the weird.”<sup>205</sup> Given its inherent preoccupation with all that is eerie, peculiar, and unnerving the frequency with which it appears in Gothic criticism is unsurprising. Furthermore, as something that is not easy to concretely define it arguably tempts innumerable, divergent, explanations.

Freud’s *The Uncanny* draws on Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 essay ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’ with both essays expanding “strongly on nineteenth-century anthropological theories of animism that were first articulated with reference to primitive cultures.”<sup>206</sup> In a section later cited

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<sup>199</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 141.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>202</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 148.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>205</sup> Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>206</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, “Childhood, Severed Heads, and the Uncanny: Freudian Precursors,” *Victorian Studies*, 58:1 (Autumn 2015): 3.

by Freud,<sup>207</sup> Jentsch contends that within any uncanny sensation, there is a level of uncertainty, “namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate.”<sup>208</sup> As examples Jentsch proposes the “horror caused by a dead body or death’s head”<sup>209</sup> or when “the head of a pillar [...] comes alive by means of hallucination.”<sup>210</sup> Of significant importance to this study is his inclusion of “waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata”<sup>211</sup> in this list.

Freud, with reference to E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (1816), contests this inclusion: “I must say, however [...] that the motif of the seemingly animate doll Olympia is by no means the only one responsible for the incomparably uncanny effect of the story, or even the one to which it is principally due.”<sup>212</sup> Rather, it is the image of the uncanny doll, combined with additional unnerving images, which grips the reader’s imagination. For him the figure of the ‘living’ doll itself is rarely enough to evoke horror, the horror must be multi-layered. The doll “does not seem to threaten the child with its potential for seeming – or being – alive”<sup>213</sup> indeed, the child may even desire it. It is, as Jervis reasons, only later “that the ‘living doll’ becomes potentially uncanny, *after* the child has internalised the key distinctions that set in place the modern ontology of the real: the distinctions between living/dead, organic/inorganic, natural/artificial.”<sup>214</sup> The doll achieves this position “through raising issues of life as reproduction, the body as inorganic, as mechanism.”<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> “E. Jentsch singles out, as an excellent case, ‘doubt as to whether an apparently animate object really is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate.’ [...] while not wholly convinced by the author’s arguments, we will take them as a starting point for our own investigation, because he goes on to remind us of one writer who was more successful than any other at creating uncanny effects [...] E. T. A. Hoffmann.” - Freud, *The Uncanny*, 135.

<sup>208</sup> Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” trans. Roy Sellars, in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, eds. Jo Collins and John Jervis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 221.

<sup>209</sup> Shuttleworth, “Childhood, Severed Heads, and the Uncanny,” 3.

<sup>210</sup> Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” 224.

<sup>211</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 135.

<sup>212</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 136.

<sup>213</sup> Jervis, “Uncanny Presences,” 19.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

Robotist Masahiro Mori expanded on these theories of the uncanny in his essay “The Uncanny Valley.”<sup>216</sup> First published in the Japanese journal *Energy* in 1970 to surprisingly minimal acclaim, its popularity has, in recent decades, soared, and it is presently of significant relevance to a broad range of academic disciplines.<sup>217</sup> Mori’s essay considered a person’s potential response to encountering a robot that appeared to be, and acted as if it was, almost human. He argued “that as robots appear more human, observers will respond in a more positive way to them, but when the appearance is very human-like, a point will be reached when observers will feel uncanniness and this will make human-robot interaction difficult, if not impossible.”<sup>218</sup> This descent into eeriness signals the uncanny valley, “a valley between objects that are not (yet) uncanny, such as puppets and real humans beings.”<sup>219</sup> Meanwhile, this valley, an unnerving in-between, is populated by a host of uncanny entities including “corpses, zombies, and certain humanlike robots,”<sup>220</sup> and of course, dolls. Mori noted that the integral uncanniness of these entities would only be amplified if the element of movement was added, for “it would be like a horror story.”<sup>221</sup> The uncanniness of dolls then, particularly within a horror context, is at its most explicit in the moment of their potential animation.

Over the decades doll manufacturers have learned to better manipulate the materials of production resulting in increasingly realistic products that mimic human actions; from the ‘sleep eye’ dolls of the mid-nineteenth century whose moveable eyes were operated by weights or wires, to Zapf Creation’s ‘Baby Born’ doll (1991) that mimicked a baby’s cry and appeared to urinate.

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<sup>216</sup> The original title of the paper ‘Bukimi No Tani’ more literally translated is “valley of eeriness.” – Jeremy Hsu, “Robotics’ Uncanny Valley Gets New Translation,” Live Science, June 12, 2012, <https://www.livescience.com/20909-robotics-uncanny-valley-translation.html>.

<sup>217</sup> Including anthropology, sociology, literary and film studies, and the digital humanities.

<sup>218</sup> Mark Coeckelbergh, *New Romantic Cyborgs: Romanticism, Information Technology, and the End of the Machine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 112.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Masahiro Mori, “The Uncanny Valley,” trans. MacDorman and Norri Kageki, *IEEE Robotics and Automation Magazine* 19:2 (June 2012): 100.

The potential creepiness of these figures is further complicated by increased customer demand for hyper-realistic dolls. Reborn dolls are a fascinating example of this.<sup>222</sup> These hyper-realistic figures, meticulously handmade “from vinyl or silicone [...] [are] meant to appear as much like a real baby as possible.”<sup>223</sup> The practice of fashioning these dolls is known as ‘reborning’, their makers referred to as ‘reborners,’ and in recent decades a burgeoning online community of enthusiasts has emerged. Some of these dolls are fitted with imitation “heartbeats, breathing motion, and cooing,”<sup>224</sup> others play a central role in elaborate birthing ceremonies, each one is treated like an actual child by their devoted owner. Considered by some psychologists to be valuable transition objects for those dealing with the aftermath of bereavement, these dolls serve “a deeper purpose [...] as therapeutic aids to help women through infertility, miscarriage and loss of a child, as well as anxiety and depression.”<sup>225</sup> However, as Rodriguez McRobbie notes their realism presents a problem, for “the more lifelike an infant doll is [...] the more desirable it is among reborn devotees, but equally, the more it seems to repulse the general public.”<sup>226</sup> Photographer and performance artist Jamie Diamond confronts this dualism in her ‘I Promise to Be a Good Mother’ self-portrait series, in which she assumes “the role of subject and photographer and put[s] on the mask of motherhood” in order to query “the fantasy of motherhood, the social structure of the relationship between mother and child, and the performance of inherited social and gender roles.”<sup>227</sup> The

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<sup>222</sup> First produced in the 1990s by doll enthusiasts in the United States of America, the commercial market for reborn dolls has since boomed. Also known as ‘lifelike dolls’ or ‘reborn baby dolls’, they are predominately purchased online and range greatly in price depending on their level of craftsmanship. Leading online retailer Reborn Dolls Shop’s ([www.reborndollsshop.com](http://www.reborndollsshop.com)) prices start at \$49.99. They promise that “Whether you're looking for a special doll you've dreamed of, a lifelike baby doll to cuddle, a companion for your child to grow up with, a reborn baby doll light up hope for the mother who lost her child, or you want to buy a gift for someone in your life, it's all right in here, waiting for you to discover!” - “About Us,” Reborn Dolls, accessed July 7, 2023, [https://www.reborndollsshop.com/pages/about-us?spm=.collection\\_238975bb-a32c-40f3-813e-16b03aa74c0a.footer\\_1.1&spm\\_prev=.page\\_64279.header\\_1.1](https://www.reborndollsshop.com/pages/about-us?spm=.collection_238975bb-a32c-40f3-813e-16b03aa74c0a.footer_1.1&spm_prev=.page_64279.header_1.1).

<sup>223</sup> Naomi Fry, “The Women Who Mother Lifelike Baby Dolls,” *The New Yorker*, January 31, 2019, [https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-women-who-mother-lifelike-baby-dolls?utm\\_social-type=owned&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_brand=tny&mbid=social\\_facebook&utm\\_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2UdvWy3WaCj0Lkt0Qg29RlhXnArjVgAQ55AVvYYTIpjYg3WsIphirGxU](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-women-who-mother-lifelike-baby-dolls?utm_social-type=owned&utm_medium=social&utm_brand=tny&mbid=social_facebook&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2UdvWy3WaCj0Lkt0Qg29RlhXnArjVgAQ55AVvYYTIpjYg3WsIphirGxU).

<sup>224</sup> Rodriguez McRobbie, “The History of Creepy Dolls.”

<sup>225</sup> Claire Tailleur-Hayes, “Mothers reborn: The surprising benefits of lifelike dolls,” *BBC News*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-59604011>.

<sup>226</sup> Rodriguez McRobbie, “The History of Creepy Dolls.”

<sup>227</sup> “I Promise to be a Good Mother,” Jamie Diamond, accessed July 7, 2023, <http://www.jamiegdiamond.com/photolanding.php?id=14>.



eeriness that permeates these shots shifts to uncanniness as the viewer grasps that the new-born within these photos is in fact a reborn doll. These developments, while beneficial for some, risk plunging what was once a treasured doll into the depths of the uncanny valley.

Yi Sencindiver asserts that “whether of porcelain, vinyl, or cloth, a sexual surrogate or an object of a child’s caress, divine icon, fetish, or voodoo curse, or assuming its notorious revengeful appearance in horror fiction and film, the doll in its various permutations is endowed with a unique auratic presence susceptible of acquiring an uncanny hue.”<sup>228</sup> The figure of the ‘living’ doll regardless of its form or function, is intrinsically uncanny. When placed against the backdrop of a Gothic narrative, where, more often than not it interacts with an array of other peculiar figures or eerie objects, its uncanniness is only amplified. Here, fiction affords, as Freud observed, “possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life.”<sup>229</sup> The key narratives chosen for this study, play directly and strenuously with notions of the uncanny, specifically with the idea, put forward by Nicholas Royle, that “the uncanny is a form of making strange.”<sup>230</sup> It is this, alongside that in-between that Bill Brown refers to as “an indeterminate ontology,” that this study is perhaps most concerned with, specifically, “the inability to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate.”<sup>231</sup> This thesis examines how and why this ontology manifests in the figure of the ‘living’ doll. In these chilling narratives replete with images of doubling, violence, and mutilation the doll is neither human nor object, animated by language, concurrently set in a lifeless state.

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<sup>228</sup> Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll’s Uncanny Soul,” 103.

<sup>229</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 157.

<sup>230</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>231</sup> Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 137.

## A Review of the Scholarly Literature on Dolls

Given the scarcity of scholarly research on the 'living' doll figure in horror, it is necessary to consider wider research on dolls. Eva-Maria Simms observes that despite "featuring prominently in many female children's lives" the figure of the doll "has found little attention from the academic community. In the history of psychoanalysis, as in the history of traditional psychology, the doll has not been found worthy of examination."<sup>232</sup> Her 1996 essay 'Uncanny Dolls: Images of Death in Rilke and Freud' goes some way to addressing this. Through an examination of Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, short stories, and essays, Simms highlights "the dark and deadly reaches of the transitional object, showing us the uncanniness of the doll at home in its pre-oedipal playground."<sup>233</sup> Despite working outside of Gothic studies Simms defines the doll in distinctly Gothic terms, deeming it "a dead body, an inanimate child, an unresponsive, rigid corpse."<sup>234</sup> Her frequent emphasis on the deathly aspect of these inanimate figures - "without the child's compassion and imagination, the doll is a corpse"<sup>235</sup> - is a perspective that this study echoes, particularly within the chapters that examine memorialisation and haunting. Simm's conclusion that "the uncanniness inspired by a dead but seemingly alive object is that it reminds us of a primitive period in our personal and cultural development where the boundaries between I and the world were less clearly defined"<sup>236</sup> has also been influential here.

Cultural historian Miriam Formanek-Brunell is a prominent voice in the established field of Dolls Studies. In *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (1998) she traces the history of dolls produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and explores how these dolls conveyed diverse notions of feminine identity. In her introduction to the

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<sup>232</sup> Eva-Maria Simms, "Uncanny Dolls: Images of Death in Rilke and Freud," *New Literary History*, 27:4 (1996): 663.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid*, 664.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid*, 672.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid*, 676.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*, 674.

2012 special issue of *Girlhood Studies* focusing on dolls, Formanek-Brunell traces the gradual expansion of the field from Granville Stanley Hall and Alexander Caswell Ellis' pioneering text *A Study of Dolls* (1896), through the 1960s when "dolls became the focus of a lively (and still on-going) discourse among parents and pundits but not among academics about their social meanings in the lives of girls,"<sup>237</sup> to the 1990s when "dolls became the subject of greater scrutiny by psychologists, sociologists, educators and other academics all interested in what dolls had to say about girls' identities and grown-ups' ideals."<sup>238</sup> Formanek-Brunell determines that this upsurge in doll-centred research, was influenced by "the rise of Girl Power, girls' studies, cultural studies, multiculturalism, the commercial success of the American Girl Doll (AGD) line, and the proliferation of the Barbie brand."<sup>239</sup> Thus, reinforcing the notion that dolls are an important signifier of broader cultural trends, issues, and fears. More recently, she co-edited, with Jennifer Dawn Whitney, *Dolls Studies: The Many Meanings of Girls' Toys and Play* (2015), an innovative anthology that established Dolls Studies as an interdisciplinary scholarly field to which this thesis contributes. Her edited volume *Deconstructing Dolls: Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play* (2021) acknowledges the developing scholarship within Girlhood Studies that centres upon dolls as sources of biographical evidence, and through expanding the definition of doll, seeks to comprehend both the historical and contemporary implications of dolls and doll play. Other significant publications within the realm of Dolls Studies include Curtis L. Carter's *Dolls in Contemporary Art: A Metaphor of Personal Identity* (1993), Kitti Carriker's *Created in Our Image: The Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object* (1999), and A. F. Robertson's *Life Like Dolls: The Collector Doll Phenomenon and the Lives of the Women Who Love Them* (2004).

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<sup>237</sup> Miriam Formanek-Brunell, "Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls: New Directions in Doll Studies," *Girlhood Studies*, 5:1 (January 2012): 3.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

Outside of the realm of Dolls Studies, researchers from a diverse array of academic disciplines have endeavoured to examine the multitude of meanings that the figure of the doll can present. In *Toy Medium: Materialism and the Modern Lyric* (2000) Daniel Tiffany attempts to answer perhaps one of Western philosophy's principal enigmas: "What is the role of the imagination in defining material substance?"<sup>240</sup> This study of materialist philosophy examines the historic union of matter and metaphor through a variety of topics, one of which is dolls. Highlighting the inherent uncanniness of their materiality, Tiffany concludes that a doll's "menace appears to reside in the ambiguity of its material presence."<sup>241</sup>

In *Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (2002) Gaby Wood eloquently conveys the story of humanity's time-honoured obsession with creating artificial life, with moving dolls, talking robots, intelligent machinery, lifelike automata, and bionic men. Wood takes this theme, well-established within the realms of fairy-tale and science fiction, positively flourishing within the Gothic, and exposes "the prehistory of a modern idea."<sup>242</sup> *Living Dolls* is "the story of the men who wanted to play God, and of their awe-struck public, who at the sight of every artificial life worried about the authenticity of their own."<sup>243</sup>

Bill Brown's musings on dolls align with the broader model of thing theory, a branch of critical theory that utilising Martin Heidegger's distinction between objects and things, concentrates upon literary and cultural depictions of human-object relations. In *Other Things* (2015) Brown explores the continued academic interest in "material culture"<sup>244</sup> and "the world of things."<sup>245</sup> In respect to the cultural significance of the material 'thing' most allied with childhood – toys – Brown credits

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<sup>240</sup> Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), back cover.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>242</sup> Wood, *Living Dolls*, xxvi.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

Walter Benjamin's reflection that a child in the act of play has a special "interaction with the material world,"<sup>246</sup> with inspiring successive readings of the child-doll bond.

In *On Dolls* (2018) Kenneth Gross curates, and introduces, a remarkable collection of essays and reflections which examine the sincerity of the act of play, together with the incomprehensibility of inanimate life, musings that explore "the unknown spaces, noises, dust, lost objects, and small animals that fill any house."<sup>247</sup> Gross perceives that a doll's life is "at once like and unlike a life we know,"<sup>248</sup> and thus "these things, ordinary and strange at once, come to baffle our very relation to them, and thus our relation to ourselves."<sup>249</sup> Dolls, alongside their kin puppets, mannequins, and automata become things that inexorably alter culturally established notions of innocence, and thus childhood, existing in an intermediary space that we are unable to fully grasp. Gross affirms that dolls are "perversely, unnervingly and triumphantly unkillable"<sup>250</sup> precisely because they occupy that liminal space between life and death. These works have been employed within this thesis where pertinent and constitute part of its wider theoretical framework.

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>247</sup> Gross, "Introduction," back cover.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, xiv.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, ii.

## A Review of the Scholarly Literature on Dolls and Horror

The final part of this literature review assesses the small body of secondary criticism that is specifically concerned with dolls *and* the horror genre and positions this thesis accordingly. Publications on dolls and horror are surprisingly scant given the popularity of the ‘living’ doll figure within the genre. Where they do exist, they tend to be in the form of mass-market, often self-published, general readership books, while academic scholarship on the topic tends to be restricted to single articles or book chapters, which, due to their condensed form, largely focus on just one or two specific literary or visual case studies.<sup>251</sup>

Examples of the former include: Christopher Balzano and Tim Weisberg’s *Haunted Objects: Stories of Ghosts on Your Shelf* (2012) which details the backstories of an array of purportedly haunted objects, Stacey Graham’s *Haunted Stuff: Demonic Dolls, Screaming Skulls and Other Creepy Collectibles* (2014) which explores the eerie world of possessed possessions, disturbing objects which “quietly invade our homes through auctions, yard sales, shady antique dealers, and the most insidious of all: grandmothers,”<sup>252</sup> John Harker’s *Demonic Dolls: True Tales of Terrible Toys* (2015) which illustrates the macabre accounts of the world’s most famous haunted dolls, Davina Rush’s *The Handbook of Haunted Dolls* (2019) which conveys the history of thirty three ostensibly haunted dolls, and J. W. Ocker’s *Cursed Objects: Strange But True Stories of the World’s Most Infamous Items* (2020) which compiles accounts of an intriguing collection of purportedly cursed objects including “crystal skulls and creepy dolls, tiny stone heads and ancient weapons.”<sup>253</sup> There is also an emerging trend for mass-market books which rank entries of the creepy doll horror movie subgenre, examples of this

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<sup>251</sup> My contribution to *The Palgrave Handbook to Horror*, “Discussing Dolls: Horror and the Human Doll”, falls into this category.

<sup>252</sup> Stacey Graham, *Haunted Stuff: Demonic Dolls, Screaming Skulls, and Other Creepy Collectibles* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2014), 1.

<sup>253</sup> J. W. Ocker, *Cursed Objects: Strange but True Stories of the World’s Most Infamous Items* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2020), 13.

include Alan Toner's *Creepy Doll Movies* (2018) and Steve Hutchinson's *Rivals of Terror: Dolls and Horror* (2019).

Whilst generally lacking in critical analysis, these are of some use when piecing together a survey of dolls and horror, particularly when examining real-life instances of purportedly 'haunted' dolls. Furthermore, the demand for these types of texts, particularly amongst amateur ghost-hunters and paranormal devotees, reflects an increasing, but still perhaps somewhat niche, public interest in the supernatural which is reflected in the abundance of popular horror media now produced on the topic. This supernatural interest extends beyond books and visual media,<sup>254</sup> to include ghost tours<sup>255</sup> which visit the sites of supposed hauntings, and museums dedicated to supernatural and otherworldly exhibits. There has also been a reported upsurge in the number of people who either hold supernatural beliefs, or who have purportedly had encounters with the paranormal.<sup>256</sup>

Examples of the latter are of more concrete use to this study. Hans Staat's article 'Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll: *Child's Play* and the Modern Horror Film' (2012) celebrates *Child's Play* as "an example of the reactionary, rather than progressive, horror film."<sup>257</sup> It strongly rejects "the facile argument that *Child's Play* is a sleazy horror film devoid of artistic merit or political value,"<sup>258</sup> and instead stresses that the film's significant contribution to the horror genre, "is that the devil--doll can kill as effectively as celebrity slashers."<sup>259</sup> Of primary significance to this study is Staats'

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<sup>254</sup> Including paranormal reality television series such as *Most Haunted* (2002-2019).

<sup>255</sup> Variations on these tours appear to be available in almost every UK city. Ghost tours "are now so ubiquitous across UK cities that at least 30 run in London alone." - Sarah Cox, "Study Reveals Secrets Behind Ghost Tour Boom," Goldsmiths, October 31, 2019, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/spectral-cities/>.

<sup>256</sup> These figures are, of course, hard to reliably quantify. "Gallup polls for decades have shown that a *majority* of Americans – 75% - believe in at least one of the supernatural phenomena surveyed [...] [these surveys] clearly show that, over the past decade, there has been a significant *increase* in the number of people who believe in the supernatural, with demonic possession the only category showing a decline." – Dennis Waskul and Michele Waskul, *Ghost Encounters: The Hauntings of Everyday Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>257</sup> Staats, "Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll," 55.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

presentation of the notion of a ‘devil-doll’, a figure he concludes is an “underappreciated monster within horror cinema in general and the modern horror film in particular.”<sup>260</sup> He determines that this being “is not so much a monster that invokes feelings of horror (nausea, repulsion, disgust),” rather it “is an atavistic figure, horrifying because it is the uncontrolled and irrational other, a primal figure that defies normality, rationality, and civilization.”<sup>261</sup> This thesis adopts this idea of a specific subtype of doll, the ‘devil-doll’ in its analysis of the *Child’s Play* franchise in chapter one.

Susan Yi Sencindiver’s chapter ‘The Doll’s Uncanny Soul’ in *The Gothic and the Everyday: Living Gothic* (2014) positions the animate doll, as a cultural artefact, as a “living exponent of the Gothic.”<sup>262</sup> In it Yi Sencindiver argues that the doll’s uncanniness “emerges precisely on account of the fact that her functions and cultural meanings have varied across historical time [...] and across the different ages forming an individual chapter.”<sup>263</sup> She strives to determine “why the animate doll motif has been so readily appropriated by the Gothic” at first through an examination “of their shared historically contingent features,”<sup>264</sup> before utilising Freud’s discussion of dolls “as a useful point of departure in explaining what is at stake in the doll’s uncanniness.”<sup>265</sup> Finally, Yi Sencindiver draws upon religious scholarship “in souls and spiritual agencies to explain why the question of [...] [the animate doll’s] possible soul comes to us naturally.”<sup>266</sup> While this study is less concerned with the animate doll’s soul, or lack thereof, Yi Sencindiver’s articulate emphasis on the doll’s perpetual duality, on its “promising immortality and foreboding death” which “both aggravate[s] and appease[s] this [underlying] anxiety pertaining to the carnal limits of human bodies”<sup>267</sup> is key here. Much of the terror that these uncanny doppelgängers elicit in their human counterparts is driven by this inescapable comparison, by confrontation with the unnerving notion

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>262</sup> Piatti-Farnell and Beville, “Living Gothic,” 9.

<sup>263</sup> Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll’s Uncanny Soul,” 104.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 114.



that these lifeless figures who bear an uncanny resemblance to us are not, in fact, too dissimilar from our living selves. This terror only escalates when these figures, perhaps inevitably within a horror context, acquire a semblance of humanity.

Chifen Lu's article 'Uncanny Dolls and Bad Children in Contemporary Gothic Narratives' (2019) considers the increasingly common intersection of 'bad' children and 'evil' dolls in Gothic fiction and film through analysis of Joyce Carol Oates 'The Doll-Master' (2016) and William Brent Bell's *The Boy* (2016). The analysis of these two texts, however, is frustratingly limited for Lu also attempts to cover an array of other angles including: "ancient ritualistic effigies, puppet theater, figurine artifacts for household display, children's dolls, the concomitant development of the modern toy industry and youth subcultures, and the 'possessed doll' Gothic subgenre."<sup>268</sup> While the interdisciplinarity here is admirable, such a range can obviously not be fully explored within the limits of one article. Lu is largely successful in her aim to demonstrate how in the Gothic dolls "become material embodiments of our contrasting, ever-changing attitudes toward the idea of childhood and our rapport with things."<sup>269</sup> However, the conclusion that "we are all still children clinging to our respective playthings—playthings which, paradoxically, are the real 'doll-masters' in our time"<sup>270</sup> is overly psychoanalytic in approach and fails to fully appreciate the manifold nuances of these uncanny figures.

Joana Rita Ramalho's article 'The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls: Reconfiguring Personhood through Object Vivification in Gothic Film' (2020) develops Stanley Cavell's idea that in film "a trivial thing easily becomes a mythical object, probing its own significance."<sup>271</sup> In it Ramalho argues

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<sup>268</sup> Chifen Lu, "Uncanny Dolls and Bad Children in Contemporary Gothic Narratives," *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 45:2 (September 2019): 196.

<sup>269</sup> Lu, "Uncanny Dolls and Bad Children," 196.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>271</sup> Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough, "What Becomes of Thinking on Film? Stanley Cavell in conversation with Andrew Klevan", in *Film as Philosophy, Essays in Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell*, eds. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 208.

that the Gothic, even more so than horror, “invites viewers to become enthralled by ‘trivia’ objects that rapidly take on aesthetically and thematically central roles in the narrative.”<sup>272</sup> One object frequently employed by the Gothic in this manner is the doll. Using Robert Aldrich’s *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), Otto Preminger’s *Bunny Lake is Missing* (1965), and Maria Lease’s *Dolly Dearest* (1991) as case studies, Ramalho explores “the disruptive tendencies that in/animate agents foster” and examines “the manner in which Gothic dolls activate uncanniness to represent subjectivity in crisis.”<sup>273</sup> Akin to this study, Ramalho stresses the duality of the doll figure within the Gothic, emphasising that they are concurrently “sublimely odd and oddly appealing.”<sup>274</sup> A trait which she then suggests “makes them singularly suited to dramatize deep-seated human fears and anxieties,”<sup>275</sup> ageing in the case of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, mental illness in the case of *Bunny Lake is Missing*, and hyper-consumerism and the supernatural in the case of *Dolly Dearest*. In employing the figure of the doll to examine the tumultuous relationship between humans and human-like objects, Ramalho’s article makes a valuable contribution to the ongoing academic discourse on objects in Gothic cinema.

These texts have been particularly useful in helping to identify thematic consistencies within the ‘living’ doll subgenre. Furthermore, they have helped to establish a theoretical framework upon which this thesis has built. Finally, they have begun a dialogue within Gothic studies on this burgeoning, interesting, and valuable topic, which this thesis intends to extend. This collection of disparate essays on individual texts leaves a gap, however. To date there is no extended study of, or edited volume devoted to, the subject of dolls and horror. This is the first full length study of the ‘living’ doll figure in contemporary horror and aims to go some way towards addressing critical neglect of the subgenre.

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<sup>272</sup> Ramalho, “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls,” 34.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

Due to this lack of focused secondary criticism on the topic, it has been necessary to draw upon work from other disciplines. This thesis does not pick an individual theory and analyse the key narratives exclusively in that light. Rather, in line with other Gothic criticism, it adopts a strategic approach to theory, which allows for a more wide-ranging, non-exclusionary consideration of dolls and horror. These theories are employed if and where they are relevant, and not merely as an academic tick box exercise. In line with the thematic structure of this thesis, criticism on the topics of consumption, fetishism, memorialisation, and haunting have also been surveyed. Literature reviews pertaining to each of these topics can be found at the beginning of the relevant chapter.

## Overview of Thesis Chapters

This thesis is comprised of four chapters each focusing on a different theme that is, as this study will demonstrate, intrinsic to contemporary monstrous depictions of the ‘living’ doll figure. The rationale for this thematic approach is twofold. Firstly, it permits identification and thorough explanation of recurrent central themes. Secondly, it assists a consensus as to what this then suggests about the monstrous doll figure’s relationship to horror more broadly. Of course, only a certain number of texts can be analysed fully within the confines of one chapter. Through highlighting key themes that run the gamut of ‘living’ doll horror narratives, this study encourages the reader to consider where other texts may sit within this proposed mould. Together these four chapters highlight the prevalence, demonstrate the scope, and explore the significance of the ‘living’ doll figure. Collectively they provide an identifiable, yet evolving picture of the monstrous doll, and crucially of its current form and function within the Gothic.

The first chapter of this thesis centres upon that most notorious of cinematic killer dolls, Chucky. The diminutive doll, has, as Billson observes, “evolved into the elder statesman of the evil doll subgenre, amassing a loyal midnight movie fandom”<sup>276</sup> in the process. This chapter examines the maniacal doll’s initial appearance in Tom Holland’s *Child’s Play* (1988) alongside Lars Klevberg’s recent remake *Child’s Play* (2019), and endeavours to determine Chucky’s legacy upon the killer doll subgenre. Through tracing the trajectory of the *Child’s Play* franchise, this chapter considers how Chucky’s appearance, motive, and methods have been revised in subsequent iterations to better reflect contemporary fears. The central focus of this chapter is on how both narratives, despite their differing approaches, position the ‘living’ doll figure as consumed object. Klevberg’s reboot substitutes the possessed Good Guy doll of Holland’s original with an

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<sup>276</sup> Anne Billson, “From Hugo to Chucky and Annabelle – Who is the Scariest Doll of Them All?,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/apr/20/from-hugo-to-chucky-and-annabelle-who-is-the-scariest-doll-of-them-all>.

uncontrollable smart toy named Buddi, thus substituting former fear of the supernatural with the present-day threat posed by artificial intelligence and digital surveillance technologies. Chucky's position as an eminent horror monster is undeniable, a monster appropriate for this capitalist age, whose marketed position as must-have toy collapses with grisly consequences.

Chapter two is primarily concerned with the 'living' doll's position as a fetish object. It highlights how eroticism, horror, and the animate doll figure are inherently intertwined with a myriad of examples populating literature, film, television, and the visual arts. Within these narratives these uncanny doppelgängers are routinely depicted as sources of both allure and repulsion. Outside of the realms of fiction, synthetic dolls which adhere to an idealised model of the female form are becoming progressively more advanced with technology companies capitalising on this disturbing desire. This chapter positions this debate within broader ongoing discussions regarding advancements in sex technology and female subjectivity. It considers Angela Carter's novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), her short story 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974), and Ramsey Campbell's short story 'Lilith's' (1987) and analyses the myriad ways in which these authors employ the animate doll as a grotesquely erotic figure, who, when permitted agency, acquires the power to evoke both fear and desire in their human counterparts. This chapter concludes that the objects of desire that both Carter and Campbell portray, are concomitantly objects of terror.

Chapter three explores the notion of the animate doll as memorial object through analysis of three diverse horror texts: Ramsey Campbell's novel *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* (1976), the 'Be Right Back' (2013) episode of Charlie Brooker's television series *Black Mirror* (2013), and William Brent Bell's 2016 film *The Boy*. This chapter explores the ways in which these narratives employ the 'living' doll figure as a ghoulish method of memorialisation. In *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* the protagonist Chris unearths miniature life-like dolls which memorialise both his violent

birth and his mother's subsequent death. In 'Be Right Back' pioneering technological developments enable a grieving widow to reawaken her former lover in the body of a synthetic doppelgänger. In *The Boy* grief-stricken parents channel their sorrow and displaced affection into a porcelain doll that uncannily resembles their deceased son. In these narratives, set against that most Gothic of backdrops, death, the doll figure exists as a macabre memorial object, one that is inexorably tied to the past, yet has a troubling, oftentimes horrifying, impact on the present and its inhabitants.

The final chapter of this thesis examines the ways in which the figure of the animate doll and notions of haunting manifest in James Wan's *The Conjuring* universe. It concentrates upon one ostensibly paranormal artefact, Annabelle, and scrutinizes its position as haunted object through analysis of the narratives that originate from the mythology surrounding this supposedly demonic figure. Each of the films examined within this chapter – Wan's *The Conjuring* (2013), John R. Leonetti's *Annabelle* (2014), David F. Sandberg's *Annabelle: Creation* (2017), and Gary Dauberman's *Annabelle Comes Home* (2019) – stem from supernatural legend purporting to be truth, as they pay tribute to real-life Raggedy Ann doll Annabelle. This chapter considers the folkloric and anthropological connotations of ostensibly haunted objects more broadly, and regarding Annabelle, analyses the impact of the original doll's story on these successive adaptations. It explores the ways in which the cinematic Annabelle has positively surpassed its real-life counterpart, building a name and narrative that spreads far beyond the walls of Ed and Lorraine Warrens' Occult Museum.

## Chapter One: Doll as Consumed Object

“What are you worried about? They're only toys.”<sup>277</sup>

### *Small Soldiers*

“You know, dolls make the very best friends. Just because they can't speak doesn't mean they don't listen. And did you know that when we leave them alone in our room, they come to life?”<sup>278</sup>

### *A Little Princess*

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<sup>277</sup> *Small Soldiers*, directed by John Dante, performances by Kirsten Dunst, Gregory Smith, and David Cross (1998; Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Pictures), DVD.

<sup>278</sup> *A Little Princess*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, performances by Liesel Matthews, Eleanor Bron, and Liam Cunningham (1995; Beverley Hills, CA: Baltimore Pictures, 1997), DVD.

## Chucky, The Unkillable Killer Doll

There is conceivably not a more universally renowned nor resolutely enduring example of a fictitious murderous doll than that of Chucky. Indeed, in his own humble opinion he's "fucking infamous [...] one of the most notorious slashers in history!"<sup>279</sup> First introduced to viewers in 1988 in Tom Holland's now cult-classic, *Child's Play*, Charles Lee Ray, nicknamed 'Chucky', is the titular antagonist of the horror film series.<sup>280</sup> He is a serial killer who transfers his life force into the body of a Good Guy doll, and persistently attempts to transfer his soul from the toy to a mortal body. Chucky is a horror icon who over the past four decades has blossomed into one of contemporary culture's most recognisable faces of fright. One, that as T. S Kord concludes, has proven himself "astonishingly resourceful, resilient, and, in terms of both story and cinematography, gratingly, perkily present."<sup>281</sup> Over the course of the series Chucky has established himself to be seemingly unkillable. Despite being "shot, stabbed, decapitated, dismembered, exploded, buried, vaporized, and melted down in one sequel or another,"<sup>282</sup> he stubbornly endures. This apparent invincibility is referenced directly in the fourth chapter of the series,<sup>283</sup> *Bride of Chucky* (1998), when the doll, staring down the barrel of a gun, quips, "go ahead and shoot. I'll be back! I always come back!"<sup>284</sup>

Fast forward nearly four decades and horror fans have been gifted, with varying degrees of praise and success, six direct cinematic sequels to Chucky's iconic tale of terror. *Child's Play 2*, directed by John Lafia and released in 1990, takes place two years after the original, and showcases the murderous consequences of a toy company's attempt to re-create the doll, inadvertently

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<sup>279</sup> *Seed of Chucky*, directed by Don Mancini, performances by Jennifer Tilly, Brad Dourif, John Waters, and Billy Boyd (2004; University City, CA: Rogue Pictures, 2005), DVD.

<sup>280</sup> Also known as 'The Lakeshore Strangler'.

<sup>281</sup> T. S Kord, *Little Horrors: How Cinema's Evil Children Play On Our Guilt* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2016), 126.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> And no doubt, consciously.

<sup>284</sup> *Bride of Chucky*, directed by Ronny Yu, performances by Jennifer Tilly, Brad Dourif, and Katherine Heigl (1998; Universal City, CA: Universal Cinema, 1999), DVD.



reincarnating Ray in the process. *Child's Play 3*, directed by Jack Bender and released in 1991, follows this reincarnation route, as the toy manufacturer once again attempts to remake the doll utilising the old, still haunted materials; at least this time around Andy is now in military training, and somewhat more equipped to deal with the looming threat. In *Bride of Chucky*, directed by Ronny Yu and released in 1998, Ray is resurrected by Tiffany, an ex-girlfriend, and subsequently kills her, transferring her soul into a companion bride doll. *Seed of Chucky*, directed by Don Mancini and released in 2004,<sup>285</sup> centres on the maniacal pair's now-orphaned offspring and his journey to Hollywood. *Curse of Chucky*, released in 2013, follows the revenge set-up of the original, as Chucky infiltrates the home of another unsuspecting family and terrorises its inhabitants. *Cult of Chucky*, released in 2017, sees Brad Dourif, Jennifer Tilly, and Alex Vincent reprise their previous roles as Chucky endeavours to settle old scores with the aid of his maniacal wife.

Alongside these main releases there is a 1991 comic mini-series<sup>286</sup> and a collection of shorts which further expand the *Child's Play* universe.<sup>287</sup> *Chucky's Vacation Slides* is a short film included on the 2005 DVD release of *Seed of Chucky*. The short shows the now reunited doll family viewing photos from a recent holiday; the backgrounds of these photos, are, much to the rest of the family's horror, littered with the corpses of Chucky's most recent kills. Prior to the 2013 DVD release of *Curse of Chucky*, producers released a series of shorts titled *Chucky Invades* which showed Chucky intruding on the iconic events of various other notable horror films, including *Psycho* (1960), *Drag*

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<sup>285</sup> Mancini also directed *Curse of Chucky* and *Cult of Chucky*.

<sup>286</sup> The series, created by Andy Mangels and published by Innovation, was also called *Child's Play*. The events of the comics take place a few months after the original film.

<sup>287</sup> The reason for this continued expansion can partly be put down to the financial success of the franchise, particularly of the first, second, and fourth instalments. *Child's Play* grossed \$44,196,684 in box office takings worldwide – “Child's Play,” IMDB, accessed July 19, 2023,

[https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0094862/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=child%27s%20play](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0094862/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=child%27s%20play).

*Child's Play 2* grossed \$35,763,605 in box office takings worldwide – “Child's Play 2,” IMDB, accessed July 19, 2023,

[https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0099253/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=child%27s%20play%202](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0099253/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=child%27s%20play%202).

*Child's Play 3* grossed \$20,560,255 in box office takings worldwide – “Child's Play 3,” IMDB, accessed July 19, 2023,

[https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0103956/?ref=search\\_search\\_search\\_result\\_1](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0103956/?ref=search_search_search_result_1).

*Bride of Chucky* grossed \$50,688,658 in box office takings worldwide – “Bride of Chucky,” IMDB, accessed July 19, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0144120/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=bride%20of%20chucky](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0144120/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=bride%20of%20chucky).

*Me to Hell* (2009), *Mama* (2013), and *The Purge* (2013). Notably, *Chucky Invades* utilised archival footage of the original releases and this transplantation of Chucky into other established classics of the genre, further showcases his horror icon status. In 2022 filmmaker Kyra Elise Gardner, daughter of the franchise's current head puppeteer Tony Gardner, released *Living with Chucky*. This documentary considers the lasting appeal of Chucky through exploration of both the series' history and that of its cast and crew, concluding that "the family that slays together stays together."<sup>288</sup>

In a 2019 interview Don Mancini, principal screenwriter of the *Child's Play* series, expressed his long-held desire to bring Chucky to the small screen. That dream was realised in 2021 with Syfy series *Chucky*, which Mancini pitched as "a fresh take on the franchise" that allowed him "to explore Chucky's character with a depth that is uniquely afforded by the television series format" whilst also "staying true to the original vision that has terrorized audiences for over three decades now."<sup>289</sup> The series, based on the franchise's original characters, serves as a sequel to *Cult of Chucky* and sees Brad Dourif reprise his iconic role as the red-haired maniacal doll. Ahead of its release Mancini affirmed that the series is "closer to the tone of the first two movies [...] It's going to go back to a sort of classic scare [...] It's consistent with that mythology, but it's a whole new story. So, you could come into it without knowing anything about the previous stuff and get into it. But it is consistent with all the mythology that has come before, so it is in canon."<sup>290</sup> Chucky himself released a statement on the forthcoming project, commenting: "in these troubled times, I believe it's my obligation as a horror icon to reach the widest possible audience, on TV. For over 30 years, I've been scaring the sh\*t out of you. But now at Syfy, I look forward to really making a

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<sup>288</sup> *Living with Chucky*, directed by Kyra Elise Gardner, performances by Lin Shaye, Marlon Wayans, and Brad Dourif (2023; London: Lightbulb Film Distribution), Blu-Ray.

<sup>289</sup> Nellie Andreeva and Denise Petski, "Chucky' TV Series In Works At Syfy From Don Mancini, David Kirschner & Nick Antosca," *Deadline*, January 29, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/01/chucky-tv-series-adaptation-syfy-don-mancini-david-kirschner-nick-antosca-1202544301/>.

<sup>290</sup> David Pountain, "Child's Play TV Show Will Revisit The Tone Of Early Films, Tell Whole New Story," *We Got This Covered*, February 12, 2019, <https://wegotthiscovered.com/tv/childs-play-tv-show-gets-working-title-chucky-will-revisit-tone-early-films/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt's%20consistent%20with%20that%20mythology,so%20it%20is%20in%20canon.%E2%80%9D>.

difference.”<sup>291</sup> This preoccupation with returning to the classic scares of years gone by highlights the repetitive, arguably mechanical, nature that David Church observes in both 1980s’ horror and the slasher mode: “as the 1980s came to a close, the American horror film seemed locked into an endless loop of formulaic repetition.”<sup>292</sup> Season two of *Chucky* premiered on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2022 and filming has recently begun on a third; the appeal of Holland’s homicidal doll evidently endures.

The overall success of the franchise, coupled with audience demand, ensured the continuation of the *Child’s Play* universe.<sup>293</sup> This continuation is mirrored in the multi-layered repetitive nature of the slasher subgenre, as Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues, “the slasher movie is [...] notable for the way in which it figures generic repetitions not only in terms of unkillable killers but in terms of repetitious viewing.”<sup>294</sup> Vera Dika identifies this repetition as a hallmark of the genre, noting that “not only are the narrative elements of these films closely repeated from film to film, but so are their formal and visual elements. Shot structures are often held intact, as are framings, compositions, situations, and even the explicit content of the image.”<sup>295</sup> This repetition, Dika argues, was also a by-product of the commercial success of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978),<sup>296</sup> for the slasher films that followed it, “copied its narrative and cinematic structure in the hope of replicating its success.”<sup>297</sup> Thus the horror franchise and forces of capitalism are intimately connected to the ‘slasher cycle’.

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<sup>291</sup> Andreeva and Petski, “‘Chucky’ TV Series In Works.”

<sup>292</sup> David Church, “Return of the Return of the Repressed: Notes on the American Horror Film (1991-2006),” *Off Screen*, October 2006, [https://offscreen.com/view/return\\_of\\_the\\_repressed](https://offscreen.com/view/return_of_the_repressed).

<sup>293</sup> *The Child’s Play* series, much like *The Conjuring* universe consists of a number of “multiplicities” - Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer, “Introduction”, in *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-Offs, Remakes and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, eds. Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 1. For further discussion of this term see chapter four.

<sup>294</sup> Carolyn Jess-Cooke, *Film Sequels: Theory and Practice from Hollywood to Bollywood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 54.

<sup>295</sup> Vera Dika, “The Stalker Film 1978-81,” in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 87.

<sup>296</sup> “The beginning of the stalker cycle can be most effectively traced to the impressive success of [...] *Halloween* [...] Made for a reported \$325,000 it has since grossed over \$60 million in worldwide sales, giving it one of the highest proportional returns of any film in history.” - *Ibid*.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*.

Notably, within slasher criticism the *Child's Play* series has been habitually snubbed in favour of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974-2002), *Halloween* (1978-2021), *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980-2009), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984-1994), *Hellraiser* (1987-2018) and *Scream* (1996-2023) series. Indeed, within the criticism, as Hans Staats observes, “Chucky is an anomaly compared to Leatherface, Michael Myers, Pamela and Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger, [...] Pinhead”<sup>298</sup> and their ilk. Much has been made of the series’ shift toward a more comedic tone after the first few installments,<sup>299</sup> with Holland himself noting that “all you have to do is look at the first one and look at all the sequels, you can tell the sensibility’s different.”<sup>300</sup> This shift in tone, likely connected to market forces, was part of a broader move within horror series at the time toward comedy, a change evident in both the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* franchises. Alex Vincent when asked about the series’ progression stated that the switch to comedy was “kind of expected. That was the only way you could really carry it on [...] if you want to keep the story going, you have to [...] make fun of yourself before anyone else can.”<sup>301</sup> This shift then it seems, was somewhat inevitable, yet, as Barry Keith Grant observes, comedy has also been central to the series since its inception, “Holland’s foundational film balances its killings with comedy just as Chucky’s face combines childish innocence and chilling evil,”<sup>302</sup> thus achieving a delicate balance that is somewhat lacking in later installments, particularly *Bride of Chucky* and *Seed of Chucky*.

Another development across the series is the transformation of Chucky’s appearance. Starting life as an unblemished childhood toy, Chucky’s monstrous makeover is more befitting of

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<sup>298</sup> Hans Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll: *Child's Play* and the Modern Horror Film,” *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 11 (June 2012): 54.

<sup>299</sup> The comedic aspects of *Child's Play* are extrapolated into parody in the season four “Treehouse of Horror III” episode of *The Simpsons* (1992). In its ‘Clown without Pity’ segment Homer purchases a seemingly cursed Krusty the Clown doll as a last-minute birthday gift for his son. It is later discovered that the doll’s repeated attempts to murder Homer are due to its hardware unintentionally having been switched from ‘good’ to ‘evil’ mode.

<sup>300</sup> Paul Kane and Marie O’Regan, *Voices in the Dark: Interviews with Horror Writers* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 150.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

<sup>302</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *100 American Horror Films* (London: The British Film Institute, 2022), 43.

the horror genre, as “the doll becomes something more akin to a homicidal, malevolent talking Elmo bearing an increasingly familiar resemblance to a patchwork man or diminutive Frankenstein’s monster.”<sup>303</sup> *Child’s Play* culminates in Chucky being shot through his now, almost human, heart, a fate that one would assume, is permanent, yet the monster returns. Following in the footsteps of its established monstrous elders, as Joseph Michael Summers observes, the *Child’s Play* series demonstrates that “with great sequel comes great rejuvenation of the monster through absurd means.”<sup>304</sup> In *Child’s Play 2*, he “is thrown into a conveyor assembly where he has multiple body parts sewn to his increasingly hybridic human–doll body before turning to goo.”<sup>305</sup> Part of this substance falls into the molten plastic of what becomes another Good Guy doll thus facilitating *Child’s Play 3* in which Chucky meets his demise through an industrial fan which graphically slices him to pieces. In *Bride of Chucky* these shredded remains are retrieved by a former girlfriend, Tiffany, sloppily stitched back together, and revived through voodoo magic, before he is repeatedly shot and tossed into his own grave. In *Seed of Chucky* the doll is dismembered and decapitated by his own son, he is shot again in *Curse of Chucky*’s post-credit scene, and *Cult of Chucky* concludes with multiple uncanny iterations of the doll being shot before the original possesses his human adversary. Over the course of the series Chucky is continually destroyed and disassembled, before being reassembled and refashioned into something more and more grotesque. As his deaths become more and more intricate, the constituent parts of his being become more damaged and thus the rebuilding more extravagant and horrific. A key arc of Gothic horror “is from disruption to a calm closure,”<sup>306</sup> as Mark Jancovich contends then:

The pleasure offered by the genre is based on the process of narrative closure in which the horrifying or monstrous is destroyed or contained. The structure of horror narratives are

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<sup>303</sup> Joseph Michael Summers, “Chucky”, in *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 82.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Mark Jancovich, *Horror* (London: Batsford, 1992), 9.

said to set out from a situation of order, move through a period of disorder caused by the eruption of horrifying or monstrous forces, and finally reach a point of closure and completion in which disruptive, monstrous elements are contained or destroyed and the original order is re-established.<sup>307</sup>

Each of Chucky's elaborate deaths offers, if only momentarily, the assurance, to both the hunted, and the viewer, that the evil has been destroyed, and order may now resume.<sup>308</sup>

When studying the figure of the 'living' doll in contemporary horror, Holland's *Child's Play* is both an obvious and necessary starting point. This chapter examines Holland's original film, alongside Klevberg's 2019 remake *Child's Play*, through the lens of first 1980s', and then present-day, consumerism, considering how within these films the Chucky doll operates as a consumed, consumable, and at points, consuming, object. It explores how in both films the monstrous entity is willingly brought into the sanctity of the home and highlights how in Klevberg's remake technology has been employed to alter the nature of this threat. This chapter also endeavours to determine the legacy of *Child's Play*, both within and outside of its franchise, upon the killer doll subgenre. As Dominic Lennard observes, upon *Child's Play*'s release in 1988 "the child's doll was elevated to the status of genre icon, a figure of the same cultural (if not physical) stature as Freddy Kreuger, Jason Voorhees, or Michael Myers."<sup>309</sup> It studies Chucky's prominent position in a decade that gifted us with an iconic array of cinematic monsters and monster hunters and considers how and why this monstrous childhood toy has been altered in later revisions.

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> This is less the case in *Cult of Chucky* than the other sequels, although aspects of the ambiguous ending are explained in Mancini's *Chucky* series.

<sup>309</sup> Dominic Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 136.

### Must-have Toys and Monstrous Consumption: Tom Holland's *Child's Play*

Upon its release in 1988, reviewer response to *Child's Play* was largely positive. Film critic Roger Ebert deemed it “a cheerfully energetic horror film of the slam-bang school” that was slicker and cleverer than many of its equals, concluding that with Chucky, Holland had “succeeded in creating a truly malevolent doll.”<sup>310</sup> Caryn James judged it a “clever, playful thriller” which occupies “the narrow, self-conscious space that is truly “Twilight Zone” territory,” and thus “is a fitting successor to the classic television horror stories it takes off from,” aimed at a predominantly, “upscale horror fan”<sup>311</sup> audience. One reviewer for *The Washington Post* was less convinced, commenting that while there are some “scary moments in this wicked-doll movie” for the most part, *Child's Play* is “an intentional, but also unintentional laugh.”<sup>312</sup> Jay Scott noted that given the proliferation of contemporary advertising aimed at children,<sup>313</sup> the central premise of *Child's Play* was certainly beyond due, yet was largely unconvinced by the movie as a whole, assessing that it “isn't bloody enough to keep any self-respecting gore-ghoul awake, and it's not classy enough to interest audiences in search of a prickly literary scare. Its only possible utilitarian value might be to scare children into not watching TV.”<sup>314</sup> Comparing Chucky to other icons of the creepy doll subgenre Scott surmised that Chucky “comes nowhere near, in terms of sheer menace, the wooden creature that bloodied up Karen Black in *Trilogy of Terror*. Nor can it match, for magnificent malevolence, the dummy that stole Michael Redgrave's soul in *Dead of Night*.”<sup>315</sup> However, as this chapter will

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<sup>310</sup> Roger Ebert, “Child’s Play,” Roger Ebert, November 9, 1988, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/childs-play-1988>.

<sup>311</sup> Caryn James, “A Killer Companion in 'Child's Play',” *The New York Times*, November 9, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/09/movies/a-killer-companion-in-child-s-play.html>.

<sup>312</sup> “Child’s Play ®,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/140095562/C3BF8157AE784333PQ/1?accountid=16376>.

<sup>313</sup> “Children's television is loaded with icky items calculated to make kiddies buy cereal, lunch boxes, dollies, candies and Madison Avenue alone knows what else. That means that the premise of *Child's Play*, in which the murderer is a much-merchandised doll patterned after cartoon characters known as Good Guys, is long overdue.” - Jay Scott, “Making movies is no Child's Play,” *Globe & Mail*, November 11, 1988, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A164968020/ITOF?u=unihull&sid=summon&xid=48209d5d>.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

demonstrate, Scott's summation of Chucky as an "unreasonable facsimile of the real thing"<sup>316</sup> is unwarranted, and his legacy has in fact surpassed that of these uncanny contemporaries.

In the opening scene of *Child's Play*, maniacal villain Charles Lee Ray (Brad Dourif),<sup>317</sup> attempting to flee from police, breaks into a children's toy store, Playland Toys. Here, the intense illumination of the store, as Lennard perceives, "presents a striking contrast to the industrial debris, rain-slicked streets, and rising steam of the city surrounding it,"<sup>318</sup> and promotes luxuries likely out of reach of the average neighborhood consumer, thus suggesting "a wondrous fairyland location that exposes the adult's participation in definitions of family based on consumption."<sup>319</sup> This promised utopian vision is disturbed, however, when Ray is shot, and summons supernatural forces in an attempt to evade death. The body that Ray reluctantly elects to occupy is that of an auburn haired, freckled, proportionally child-sized toy doll. Mortally wounded, vowing revenge against both his collaborator Eddie Caputo (Neil Giuntoli), and his pursuer Detective Norris (Chris Sarandon), he seeks refuge beside a stack of boxes each housing the latest Good Guy doll. A repeated motif of the *Child's Play* series<sup>320</sup> this "*tableau vivante* [showcases] a bank of identical Good Guy dolls packaged in cellophane and lined up on a store counter,"<sup>321</sup> the juxtaposition of these unanimated figures with the disturbing hyper animation of the possessed Chucky doll employed here to eerie effect. Hastily seizing one doll from its box, Ray recites an occult incantation, pleading "give me the power I beg of you"<sup>322</sup> as lightning bolts strike the store, and the focus switches to the dolls' smiling and seemingly vacant face. As Staats observes this shift "from dying body to doll body underscores the destructive potential of consumer choice and

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> His name, an amalgamation of the names of three notorious killers: Charles Manson, Lee Harvey Oswald, and James Earl Ray.

<sup>318</sup> Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors*, 137.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 137-138.

<sup>320</sup> *Child's Play 2*, for example, culminates in the factory where the Good Guy dolls are mass-produced and thus presents recurrent line-up shots of tens of thousands of duplicate, ready for sale, dolls.

<sup>321</sup> Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 259.

<sup>322</sup> *Child's Play*, directed by Tom Holland, performances by Catherine Hicks, Chris Sarandon, and Alex Vincent (1988; Beverley Hills, CA: United Artists, 2006), DVD.



“voodoo economics.”<sup>323</sup> At the very moment he is shot to death by his pursuer, the killer transfers his soul into the smiling doll. The children’s toy in this instance, then, is as “not only the object of consumer envy but also a literal lifesaver, a subject that will disturb the congruity of adulthood and childhood.”<sup>324</sup> Coined by George H. W. Bush during the primary campaign of 1980 after he scorned President Ronald Reagan’s ‘Reaganomics’,<sup>325</sup> ‘voodoo economics’ refers to economic policies “perceived as being unrealistic and ill-advised” particularly policies “of maintaining or increasing levels of public spending while reducing taxation.”<sup>326</sup> Here, then, as Staats determines “Frankenstein meets Pinocchio in the age of consumer culture”<sup>327</sup> for Chucky is alive.

This devil-doll then breaks free from the bonds of human agency, acquires supernatural powers, and commits murder to acquire the freedom he desires. However, his ultimate survival remains reliant upon his capacity to convincingly masquerade as a consumable entity, as a child’s toy. Unlike other ‘living’ doll horror narratives that frequently “play on the uncanny ambiguity of whether the doll is actually sentient or not [...] *Child’s Play* makes it clear from the start that Chucky is truly the embodiment of evil.”<sup>328</sup> This approach, as Brendan Morrow notes, is rare within the slasher subgenre, “unlike some slasher flicks that tease out the true nature of the villain, with this one, it’s unambiguously clear.”<sup>329</sup> Ray, once contained in the figure of this seemingly loveable toy is the embodiment of what Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska terms ‘monstrous/cute’, an expression she defines as: “cute as read through its thesaurus (endearing, loveable, delightful, darling, pretty) and then re-read through the notion of strangeness and marvel (something that is not as it seems,

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<sup>323</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 62.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Defined as “the economic policies of Reagan, associated esp. with the reduction of taxes and the promotion of unrestricted free-market activity.” - “Reaganomics, *n.*,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/241651?redirectedFrom=Reaganomics#eid>.

<sup>326</sup> “Voodoo Economics, *n.*,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed July 21, 2023, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/voodoo-economics\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/voodoo-economics_n?tab=meaning_and_use).

<sup>327</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 54.

<sup>328</sup> Grant, *100 American Horror Films*, 43.

<sup>329</sup> Brendan Morrow, “How the ‘Child’s Play’ Franchise Went Wrong, and Then Right Again,” *Bloody Disgusting*, September 28, 2017, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3460388/childs-play-franchise-went-wrong-right/>.

that suffers from innate contradictions).<sup>330</sup> Transgressing boundaries, Chucky is concurrently a human and plastic figure, a killer in the body of a childhood toy.

In *Child's Play* the Good Guy doll is the must-have toy of the holiday season; its voice mimics that of a prepubescent boy as it simulates the recognition of another as its friend and companion. The doll's advertising slogan that insists "he wants you for a best friend"<sup>331</sup> is intentionally manipulative, with clear militaristic connotations, that, as Lennard observes, employs "children's consumption as recruitment."<sup>332</sup> Furthermore, this advertisement instructs young consumers to "remember to tell mom and dad, you want a Good Guy!"<sup>333</sup> in time for the impending festive season. *Child's Play* is reflective of a significant change in the American advertisement industry during the 1980s,<sup>334</sup> as "companies began to see more potential in selling to kids."<sup>335</sup> Food manufacturer Kraft, for example, "started targeting kids for cheese, pasta, Jell-O, and pudding, in addition to longstanding child food such as snacks and cereals."<sup>336</sup> *Child's Play* is thus deeply influenced by a commercial climate that had begun to target children with both record speed and efficiency,<sup>337</sup> as "TV advertising allowed for marketers to bypass parents and target

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<sup>330</sup> Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, "Monstrous/Cute: Notes on the Ambivalent Nature of Cuteness", in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Niall Scott (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 214.

<sup>331</sup> Holland, *Child's Play*.

<sup>332</sup> Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors*, 140.

<sup>333</sup> Holland, *Child's Play*.

<sup>334</sup> President Reagan's economic policies that stimulated rampant materialism certainly influenced this. As Michael Schaller asserts, "not since the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century or the Roaring Twenties had the acquisition and flaunting of wealth been so publicly celebrated as during the 1980s. Income became the accepted measure of one's value to society." – Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 70.

<sup>335</sup> Juliet B. Shor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 41.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> By 1956 advertisers "were spending a combined \$25 million a year on marketing aimed at minors; by 1987 [...] that amount had risen to an astonishing \$750 million." – Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing* (London: Verso, 1995), 167. Television advertising directed at children is commonly studied from the 1970s onwards, yet Alison Alexander et al. identify the 1950s as "a seminal decade in the development of marketing to children," for it was the era "in which the number of children increased dramatically as the baby boomers were born, and general economic stability brought consumer goods within the reach of most families. Parents who had been through the deprivations of the Depression and World War II vowed that their children would experience affluence. Consequently, children became a market." - Alison Alexander, Louise M. Benjamin, Keisha Hoerrner, and Darrell Roe, "We'll Be Back in a Moment": A Content Analysis of Advertisements in Children's Television in the 1950s," *Journal of Advertising*, 27:3 (Autumn 1998), 1.

children directly, effectively creating the concept of the consumer child.”<sup>338</sup> As Stephen Kline asserts “advertisers could now direct their communication specifically at children – to explore new ways to shape children’s wants and win their influence within the family circle.”<sup>339</sup> Television advertising enabled advertisers to target the child audience, to incite desire for a particular item, and thus generate a collective ‘need’ for the new, must-have, toy of the season. In *Child’s Play* that is Chucky, “a mass-produced, aggressively marketed commodity with an excessively high price-tag designed to give the product an illusion of exclusivity and create a consumerist furore amongst children.”<sup>340</sup> Through the motif of the desired doll, *Child’s Play* illustrates adult annoyance toward the unyielding consumer child and the economic burden that accompanies this want.

Aesthetically the Good Guy doll with its vivid striped top and dungarees resembles Hasbro’s My Buddy doll which was released to the American market in 1985. Its marketing was also similar; pitched at young boys, it also highlighted the need for care and friendship, an innovative approach that was traditionally more associated with products marketed at girls.<sup>341</sup> In *Conceiving the Seed of Chucky* (2005), a documentary included on the DVD release of *Seed of Chucky*, writer Don Mancini states that Chucky was “modeled with the ubiquitous Cabbage Patch Kids dolls in mind.”<sup>342</sup> These cloth dolls with plastic heads were sent to customers with an accompanying birth certificate and adoption paper after they had paid the applicable ‘adoption fee.’ First manufactured by Coleco Industries in 1982, Cabbage Patch Kids went on to set toy

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<sup>338</sup> Craig Ian Mann, “They Don’t Make ‘Em Like That Anymore: Dolls vs. Modernity”, in *Toy Stories: The Toy as Hero in Literature, Comics and Film*, ed. Tanya Jones (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2017), 65.

<sup>339</sup> Kline, *Out of the Garden*, 167.

<sup>340</sup> Mann, “They Don’t Make ‘Em Like That Anymore,” 67.

<sup>341</sup> See the commercial’s jingle: “My Buddy and me, we’re the best friends that could be.” – Fiercebenn, “My Buddy Commercial,” YouTube, October 18, 2010, video, 0:16 to 0:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdximU6Ao00>.

<sup>342</sup> Mancini, *Seed of Chucky*.

industry records,<sup>343</sup> and have become, alongside Barbie,<sup>344</sup> G.I. Joe,<sup>345</sup> and Monster High,<sup>346</sup> one of the most successful doll franchises in the history of the United States. The overwhelming popularity of these Cabbage Patch Kids led to a supply shortage, resulting in several riots where “parents behaved like toy store terrorists to get the perfect doll for their child”<sup>347</sup> as well as thriving black-market sales.<sup>348</sup> As Lennard argues, “the popularity and exacting price of these dolls, as well as the pressure families were put under to ensure their child was satisfied with one, certainly urges their comparison with the Chucky doll.”<sup>349</sup> Andy’s (Alex Vincent) mother Karen (Catherine Hicks) desperate and eager to fulfil her son’s wish, enables criminality to enter “through the back door of consumer culture and the single parent household.”<sup>350</sup> It is her black-market transaction that facilitates Chucky’s infiltration of the family home as she purchases the toy, a cut-price bargain at \$30, from a back street pedlar. The peddler, “a monstrous figure – his soiled cap, yellowed scarf, tattered overcoat, graying fingerless gloves, and foul language”<sup>351</sup> denoting both revulsion and risk,

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<sup>343</sup> Cabbage Patch Kids became the most popular toy of 1983, with sales from dolls and accessories producing “a staggering \$1.2 billion in revenues” from 1983 to 1986. – John Crudele, “AFTER THE CABBAGE PATCH KIDS,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/08/23/business/after-the-cabbage-patch-kids.html>. In 1985 alone sales reached “\$600 million.” – Crudele, “AFTER THE CABBAGE PATCH KIDS.”

<sup>344</sup> Richard Dickson, president and Chief Operating Officer of multinational toy manufacturer Mattel, confirmed that in 2022 Barbie doll sales revenue “reached the highest level in its history.” – Natalia Otero, “Barbie, the money-making machine,” *El País*, October 28, 2022, <https://english.elpais.com/economy-and-business/2022-10-28/barbie-the-money-making-machine.html>. That year “the doll division accounted for almost \$2.3 billion of Mattel’s gross revenues” with Barbie alone bringing “\$1.679 billion.” – *Ibid.* The release of Greta Gerwig’s feature film *Barbie* (2023) is sure to boost profits further.

<sup>345</sup> This popular line of military-themed dolls and action figures was first created by toy manufacturer Hasbro in February 1964. In the first two and a half decades of its existence “200 million related action figures and more than 100 million toy vehicles” were sold “generating more than \$1.2 billion in retail sales.” – Jerry Vondas, “G.I. Joe: 25 and \$2 Billion in the Till,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1989, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-05-07-8904100699-story.html>.

<sup>346</sup> Monster High dolls have been a commercial success for manufacturer Mattel since their release in July 2010. The adolescent dolls, modelled on the fictional offspring of popular monsters, reached sales figures of “\$500 million in just [...] [their first] three years of existence.” – Mae Anderson, “Barbie sales slide as Mattel profit falls,” *USA Today*, July 17, 2013, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/07/17/mattel-2q-profit-falls-barbie-sales-slide-again/2523879/>.

<sup>347</sup> Sharon M. Scott, *Toys and American Culture: An Encyclopaedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2010), 52.

<sup>348</sup> Despite retailing for around \$25 “black market sales of Cabbage Patch Kids recorded as high as \$2,000.” – Mark Bellomo, “The Story of Cabbage Patch Kids,” *Antique Trader*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.antiquetrader.com/collectibles/cabbage-patch-kids#:~:text=Through%20the%20years%2C%20more%20than,alike%20made%20especially%20for%20them>.

<sup>349</sup> Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors*, 140.

<sup>350</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 63.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

quips “may it bring you and your kid a lot of joy.”<sup>352</sup> Karen’s angry retort: “how do we know the damn thing’s not stolen?”<sup>353</sup> is as much a reaction to her own desperate actions as his. This transaction exists outside of the acceptable confines of the department store and the safety of the transactions that happen within, the extent of the threat that Chucky poses is an unknown and unknowable one.

Chucky’s merciless manipulation of, and intrusion into, the Barclay’s single parent household reveals one of *Child’s Play*’s central narrative concerns, the absence of a father.<sup>354</sup> Staats reasons that this absence is intended: “in terms of paternity, gender, and the nuclear family, Chucky’s connection to Andy is both a confession and a calculated manipulation.”<sup>355</sup> When Karen quizzes Andy about his relationship with Chucky,<sup>356</sup> Andy stresses Chucky’s animation, stating that Chucky’s “real name is Charles Lee Ray and he’s been sent down from heaven by Daddy to play with me.”<sup>357</sup> Andy’s relationship with Chucky then, at first a compassionate expression of his resentment and sorrow at his father’s death, quickly transforms into something more chilling, as he discovers that far from the loveable toy he anticipated, Chucky is a violent patriarch who transforms the “rational aspects of market calculation”<sup>358</sup> into “a commodified weapon of horrific destruction.”<sup>359</sup> Kord pinpoints *Child’s Play* as conceivably “the decade’s most biting attack on American consumerism.”<sup>360</sup> At the centre of this is Chucky as Holland employs the figure of the doll to make a sharp critique of consumer culture. In *Child’s Play* the duplicable nature of these

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<sup>352</sup> Holland, *Child’s Play*.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Tom Holland, after reading Don Mancini’s initial script for *Child’s Play*, was concerned that the original pitch that “whenever the boy fell asleep the doll was his alter ego. The doll got up and killed whoever the little boy was angry at,” wouldn’t generate enough sympathy within the audience, and thus added “a mother and a little boy in peril” to the narrative. - Kane and O’Regan, *Voices in the Dark*, 149.

<sup>355</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 64.

<sup>356</sup> Specifically, why Andy talks to Chucky as if he was a living, breathing friend.

<sup>357</sup> Holland, *Child’s Play*.

<sup>358</sup> Miriam Formanek-Brunell, “The Politics of Dollhood in Nineteenth-Century America” in *The Children’s Culture Reader*, ed. Henry Jenkins (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 375.

<sup>359</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 64.

<sup>360</sup> Kord, *Little Horrors*, 126.

inanimate figures is magnified as the Good Guy doll is mass-produced ensuring an ample supply, sufficient for every household.

After the turn of the century, as Bill Brown observes, “one could quite simply declare [...] that Americans lived in an ‘age of things,’”<sup>361</sup> resulting in an age of consumption that only accelerated as the decades went on. This nationwide hyper fixation upon marketing, buying, and amassing things, had an inevitable result: “we realize that we do not possess them; they possess us.”<sup>362</sup> This excessive consumption is illustrated in *Child’s Play* through Andy’s mass of Good Guy related ephemera. He is a dedicated consumer of the brand: he eats the cereal, watches the television show, wears the outfit, and plays with the toys, and is eager for this latest release. Ironically, it is this very brand loyalty that later positions him as a suspect in a murder investigation. When investigating the murder of babysitter Maggie (Dinah Manoff), Detective Norris draws Andy’s mother Karen’s attention to the remarkable likeness between the child sized suspect’s footprint left upon the kitchen counter and Andy’s own. Both are suggestive of the Good Guy Sneakers as they bear the doll’s trademark imagery of axe, baseball bat, gun, and hammer.

The figure of the toy doll, and thus the Good Guy doll here, whose “life in the midst of play is entwined with that of the child”<sup>363</sup> functions as a double of its human counterpart, yet there is also as Susan Yi Sencindiver notes “a deathly, demonic aspect” here, one “tinged with the aura of childhood innocence, and this very incongruous association suggests the threat of the perversion or corruption of childhood.”<sup>364</sup> The horror here thus lies in the in-between, in the unification of the grotesque and the innocent, for Chucky is, as Victoria Nelson discerns, “an

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<sup>361</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>362</sup> Anon., “The Contributor’s Club: The Tyranny of Things,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 97 (May 1906): 716.

<sup>363</sup> Susan Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll’s Uncanny Soul,” in *The Gothic and the Everyday: Living Gothic*, eds. Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 106.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

inanimate object invested with the aura of childhood innocence that is suddenly infused with (always) demonic energy – the upsurge of the supernatural grotesque from the least anticipated source.<sup>365</sup> This doubleness is also present in the very mechanics of how the Chucky doll is brought to life on screen. As J Halberstam asserts, the *Child's Play* films “are masterful creations of cyborg technology,” for “each doll requires about seven or eight puppeteers or human technicians”<sup>366</sup> to operate it.<sup>367</sup> Furthermore, each doll has several interchangeable heads showcasing both neutral and incensed expressions, as well as numerous other arms, legs, and assorted body parts.<sup>368</sup> The low-to-ground tracking shots from Chucky’s viewpoint are reminiscent of John Carpenter’s use of the moving camera in *Halloween* (1978). Echoes of Richard Donner’s *The Omen* (1973) are found in the death of Maggie which imitates that of Damien’s Mother and in the “film’s final freeze-frame shot of Andy glancing back at smoked Chucky before the door closes.”<sup>369</sup> Moreover the image of Chucky’s disembodied arm bursting out of a closed grate in this scene recalls Jack Torrance’s iconic door smashing outbreak in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980).

The duality of Chucky as both endearing childhood toy and murderous wretch, pre- and post-possession, centres on his voice, on the change in pitch from preadolescent to adult, from childlike innocence to vicious malice.<sup>370</sup> This disconnection of body and voice is at the very core of the horror of *Child's Play* and marks the crucial instant in which Ray’s criminality is audibly, as well as visibly, exposed. In doll form Ray acquires the ventriloquist figure’s ability to ‘throw’ his

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<sup>365</sup> Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, 258.

<sup>366</sup> J Halberstam, “Seed of Chucky: Transbiology and the Horror Flick”, in *Speaking of Monsters: A Teratological Anthology*, eds. Caroline Joan S. Picart and John Edgar Browning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 148.

<sup>367</sup> Working with these cybernetic creations was not without its problem as Holland, in a 2011 interview, explained: “the puppet was hell because it had no tensile strength and couldn’t hold the knife in its hand. And just trying to get the eye-line so it looked like it was looking at the actors. There were a lot of problems; it was technically very difficult to do.” - Kane and O’Regan, *Voices in the Dark*, 150.

<sup>368</sup> And, as the series progressed, additional heads were needed to showcase the damage (cuts, burns, etc.) to Chucky’s face.

<sup>369</sup> Grant, *100 American Horror Films*, 43.

<sup>370</sup> Staats suggests that the sheer versatility of Douirif’s voice is the overriding “signature of the *Child's Play* franchise.” - Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 61. Kim Newman likewise branded him “the premier twitchy psycho of his generation” – Kim Newman ed. *The BFI Companion to Horror* (London: Cassell, 1996), 98. He is a recurrent figure in horror cinema, appearing in William Peter Blatty’s psychological horror *The Exorcist III* (1990), Dario Argento’s Italian horror *Trauma* (1993), and Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* remakes (2007, 2009), amongst others.

voice “to disturb the boundaries of self and other and to become an autonomous partial object.”<sup>371</sup> Yet Chucky is not a ventriloquial figure but an ostensibly conventional doll, one that is able to communicate through his prior human voice. Moreover, in contrast to convention where generally the human is possessed by some malignant otherworldly force or “by a persona they have created in order to bring the doll to life,”<sup>372</sup> Chucky is a doll possessed by a dead human. Chucky is able, for a short while, to pose convincingly as the Good Guy doll that Andy desired, but the mask, inevitably, slips, exposing the corporeal, blasphemous, and feverishly bloodthirsty human beneath.

Ray’s hypermasculinity, as expressed through his love of extreme violence is constrained by the limits of the Good Guy doll, for this is a plaything designed to nurture compassion and friendship over violence and control.<sup>373</sup> In *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* Richard Slotkin examines the usage of violence in American rhetoric and cultural history and determines that violence is integral to what he terms ‘the American mythogenesis.’ This mythogenesis persisted to such an extent in America, that, he argues, “the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience,”<sup>374</sup> and it is to this image that Ray seemingly conforms. The doll is at odds with Ray’s position as serial killer, “the serial killer, of course, being American mass culture’s coded icon of unrepentant evil, secular stand-in for the Devil.”<sup>375</sup> Furthermore, the Good Guy doll parodies comparable figures marketed at boys which incorporate extreme violence.<sup>376</sup> As June Michelle

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<sup>371</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 61.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>373</sup> Elizabeth A. Wood defines ‘hypermasculinity’ as “an exaggerated set of cultural norms and behaviours usually associated with males.” – Elizabeth A. Wood, “Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power: Vladimir Putin’s Iconic Rule, 1999-2008,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18:3 (2016), 330.

<sup>374</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 2000), 5.

<sup>375</sup> Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, 258.

<sup>376</sup> Judith E. Owen Blakemore and Renee E. Centers’ 2005 study of the American toy market concluded that girls’ toys were primarily “associated with physical attractiveness, nurturance, and domestic skill whereas boys’ toys were rated as violent, competitive, exciting, and somewhat dangerous.” - Judith E. Owen Blakemore and Renee E. Centers, “Characteristics of Boys’ and Girls’ Toys,” *Sex Roles*, 53:9/10 (November 2005), 619. In *Child’s Play 3* Colonel Cochrane points to the gendered nature of doll-child play: “Now, we don’t play with dolls do we Tyler? Dolls are for girls.” - *Child’s Play 3*, directed by Jack Bender, performances by Justin Whalin, Brad Dourif, Perrey Reeves, and Jeremy Sylvers (1991; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures, 2003), DVD.



Pulliam notes, Andy “also values the qualities embodied in the Good Guy dolls, and so [...] resists when his new plaything, controlled by Ray’s spirit, attempts to initiate him into his own form of violent masculinity.”<sup>377</sup> Once relocated into the body of the doll Ray’s effort to resume this hypermasculine role is absurd.

*Child’s Play* is, as Kim Newman observes, “an effective, slick variant of Tom Holland’s habitual boy who cried wolf theme”<sup>378</sup> that deftly utilises childhood fears, specifically disbelief and loneliness. It is the tale of six-year-old Andy and his failure to persuade the adults around him that a voodoo serial killer, who is fixated on retribution and a return to a mortal body, has possessed his doll, Chucky. In contrast to the more visceral and thus believable fiends that stalk counterpart slasher narratives,<sup>379</sup> Chucky is deemed implausible and therefore innocuous. Thus, Andy’s ordeal of being pursued by the heinous doll is an intensely isolating one. As such, Andy becomes yet another case study within horror of the child in “mortal fear and danger [...] [which] is a thriving subset of the film industry.”<sup>380</sup> David W. Kupferman in his study of children and horror contends that horror films on the whole, “serve to construct the child as [...] wholly bereft of agency, straddling the Hobbes–Locke–Rousseau gamut as either monstrous or naïve.”<sup>381</sup> Critic Leonard Wolf in his 1976 *New York Times* article on the popularity of horror suggested that it is at its most effective when it is “that most sensuous and most personal of pleasures: the experience of fear in a safe place. [...] [horror] films reiterate, and validate, the continuing presence of fear in the outside world with its vulnerability to cataclysm; as well as fear in the interior world, that private life where

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<sup>377</sup> June Michele Pulliam, “Dolls”, in *Ghosts in Popular Culture and Legend*, ed. June Michele Pulliam and Anthony J. Fonseca (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2016), 84-85.

<sup>378</sup> Kim Newman ed. *The BFI Companion to Horror* (London: Cassell, 1996), 66.

<sup>379</sup> Freddy Kreuger, Jason Vorhees, Michael Myers et al.

<sup>380</sup> David W. Kupferman, “Toy Gory, or the Ontology of Chucky: Childhood and Killer Dolls”, in *Childhood, Science Fiction, and Pedagogy: Children Ex Machina*, eds. David W. Kupferman and Andrew Gibbons (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 61.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

demons also crouch.”<sup>382</sup> *Child’s Play* exemplifies exactly this, for what could be more terrifying than an innocent child under threat in his own home?

Andy’s continued assertion that Chucky is alive, and that it is he that is responsible for the horrific events that have befallen their family, puts strain on the relationship between mother and son. The doll here typifies the broader trend within the Gothic, which Joana Rita Ramalho identifies, for vivified things to “express cultural anxieties about the human body and the human mind, their limits, and their vulnerability to outside influences.”<sup>383</sup> Andy’s explanations and worries are quickly dismissed as merely products of an overactive imagination, irrespective of the fact that this ‘imagination’ is at this point responsible for multiple deaths. As Lennard observes *Child’s Play* then deftly illustrates “the terror of childish imaginations unbounded by the prescriptions of adult authority.”<sup>384</sup> Karen insists that Chucky is harmless, merely “a doll [...] made of plastic and stuffing” to which a terrified Andy retorts that “he told me to never tell about him or he’d kill me.”<sup>385</sup> After discovering that the battery-operated doll is functioning seamlessly without batteries,<sup>386</sup> Karen threatens Chucky. Dangling the doll over a fire she cautions “I’ll make you talk.”<sup>387</sup> In response the abhorrent doll bites her, bragging that that will “teach you to fuck with me!”<sup>388</sup> This distrust and disbelief is not limited to parent-child relationships. After disclosing the truth to Detective Norris, “all of a sudden he came alive in my hand,” Karen is dismayed at his disbelief, again he stresses the implausibility of a killer doll, underlining that this skepticism is because he is “sane, sane and rational.”<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Leonard Wolf, “In Horror Movies, Some Things are Sacred,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1976.

<sup>383</sup> Joana Rita Ramalho, “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls: Reconfiguring Personhood through Object Vivification in Gothic Film,” *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, 6:2 (2020): 36.

<sup>384</sup> Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors*, 2.

<sup>385</sup> Holland, *Child’s Play*.

<sup>386</sup> The original title of the film was *Batteries Not Included*. Matthew Robbins’ science fiction comedy film of the same name was released in 1987.

<sup>387</sup> Holland, *Child’s Play*.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

After becoming injured during a failed attempt to murder Detective Norris, Chucky is required to confront his own mortality. Despite boasting that the detective's actions are futile, "won't do you any good, Mikey. Ya can't hurt me!"<sup>390</sup> both the cigarette lighter and gun inflict pain and damage upon the doll. Chucky's humanity, and thus its limitations, are proven to be unavoidable. As Kupferman discerns "Chucky, it seems, is in fact a biological being— or becoming human, defying any sort of explanation within the world-for-us—or rather, he is becoming human once again, since his ontological being is that not of an inanimate object but of a serial killer."<sup>391</sup> In search of answers and a resolution to his newly exposed human condition Chucky tracks down John Aeslop Bishop (Raymond Oliver), also known as Dr Death, his voodoo mentor.<sup>392</sup> Chucky's understanding of Haitian magic here, as Dylan Goodluck observes, implies "a moral degeneration stemming from cultural, racial and class-based miscegenation," that racist fear "that the fabric of normative familial relationships be torn asunder by a nebulous 'them,'" <sup>393</sup> a fear that arguably drives a significant portion of contemporary middle-class America's distrust and suspicion. Bishop rationalizes that "the more time you spend in that body, the more human you become,"<sup>394</sup> thus "ascribing a becoming to the practice of possession."<sup>395</sup> Despite Ray's pleading Bishop refuses to free the mortal monster from its artificial cage, branding him "an abomination. An outrage against nature!" who has "perverted everything I've taught you and used it for evil! [...] you have to be stopped!"<sup>396</sup> Through torturing Bishop, Ray learns that to fully escape the confines of the doll's artificial form he must transfer his soul into the body of the person he first revealed his true self to. To 'live' he must transplant his soul into Andy. Chucky's mission is a macabre distortion of

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<sup>390</sup> Holland, *Child's Play*.

<sup>391</sup> Kupferman, "Toy Gory," 72.

<sup>392</sup> The depiction of voodoo within *Child's Play* as akin to devil-worship is problematic and dismisses the many nuances of this established religious practice. This depiction is however indicative of the period in which the film was made.

<sup>393</sup> Dylan Goodluck, "Valley of the Uncanny Dolls: the Updated Fetishism of the New Chucky," *Overland*, September 4, 2019, <https://overland.org.au/2019/09/valley-of-the-uncanny-dolls-the-updated-fetishism-of-the-new-chucky/>.

<sup>394</sup> Holland, *Child's Play*.

<sup>395</sup> Kupferman, "Toy Gory," 72.

<sup>396</sup> Holland, *Child's Play*.

Pinocchio's iconic quest to "become a real boy."<sup>397</sup> Chucky needs to possess, or rather, become, the child, for "an object can only endure insofar as it renews itself, or creates itself afresh, over and over again."<sup>398</sup> This supernatural evolution underscores the horror of the 'living' doll in *Child's Play*, for as Kupferman discerns, "what makes Chucky so frightening is that he is not a visitor from the world-in-itself or the world-without-us. He is us. His demontology [*sic*] is ours."<sup>399</sup> The horror here lies both in the dissolution of established boundaries and in the idea that an artificial being can incorporate or potentially replace a human one.

Ray's possession of a child's doll in *Child's Play* is, Staats proposes, "a liberating experience and a license to kill – an intentional rather than pathological regression into childhood."<sup>400</sup> As such, it is Chucky rather than Andy then, who accurately exemplifies the juvenile delinquent, one who conceals their corruption, hiding it within the safety of a seemingly innocent toy. Andy is not merely powerless to stop Chucky's killing spree, "he becomes an accomplice to Chucky's criminal behavior – a 'puppeteer' who is manipulated by his devildoll."<sup>401</sup> In addition to being present at the scene of Maggie's death, and accordingly a feasible suspect, Andy assists Chucky in tracking down Caputo, moving the doll across the city and thus assisting in Chucky's grisly revenge plot. As Staats submits, "the *mélange* of childhood innocence and criminality in *Child's Play* is rooted [...] in the dichotomy of the cherub and changeling,"<sup>402</sup> which is exemplified in the film's closing scene. Chucky's endeavour to possess Andy is ultimately thwarted, and *Child's Play* concludes with Chucky's lengthy demise in which he is repeatedly shot, then burned, before being beheaded and finally dismembered. His earlier pronouncement "Hi, I'm Chucky and I'm your friend to the end"<sup>403</sup> is thwarted. Realising that his death is imminent, Chucky pleads with Andy, "we're friends

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<sup>397</sup> Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio* (London: Harper Press, 2012), 153.

<sup>398</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 20.

<sup>399</sup> Kupferman, "Toy Gory," 72.

<sup>400</sup> Staats, "Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll," 61.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>403</sup> Holland, *Child's Play*.

to the end, remember?”<sup>404</sup> Andy’s iconic response, is, as Morrow suggests, “one of the great pre-kill one-liners”<sup>405</sup> of horror cinema: “this is the end, friend.”<sup>406</sup> Kupferman argues that through this final act, Andy utilizes “the only agency available to him, that of murder,”<sup>407</sup> and hence incorporates aspects of Ray’s violent hypermasculinity which he had, up until that point, wholly rejected. It is Detective Norris’ bullet however that ultimately silences the doll. Andy is the last to leave this crime scene, his face focused on the charred, mutilated remains of his former companion doll. Lennard proposes that this conclusion. “a freeze-frame of the boy being led by the hand from the room and looking back at the motionless doll through the door left ajar,”<sup>408</sup> unmistakably implies the possibility of a sequel, the literal “door ‘left open’”<sup>409</sup> More intriguingly, it also suggests both disappointment and hesitancy on Andy’s part. The loyal companion doll that the television adverts promised is absent, yet as long as Andy yearns for this “friend ‘til the end”<sup>410</sup> there resides the alluring prospect of more horror.

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Morrow, “How the ‘Child’s Play’ Franchise Went Wrong.”

<sup>406</sup> Holland, *Child’s Play*.

<sup>407</sup> Kupferman, “Toy Gory,” 71.

<sup>408</sup> Lennard, *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors*, 141.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>410</sup> Holland, *Child’s Play*.

## Smart Toys and Surveillance Horror: Lars Klevberg's *Child's Play*

In 2008, Mancini spoke of his involvement in a reboot of the *Child's Play* franchise, it was pitched as a “straightforward horror”<sup>411</sup> and Brad Dourif was predicted to return as the voice of Chucky. In a later interview, Mancini described the remake “as a darker and scarier retelling of the original film, but one that, while having new twists and turns, would not stray too far from the original concept.”<sup>412</sup> In 2009 Dourif confirmed his role in the remake but the project was cancelled shortly after.<sup>413</sup> In July 2018 “it was announced that a modern-day version of *Child's Play*, [...] was in development [...] with a different creative team than the original film series.”<sup>414</sup> In December 2018 Mancini criticized the remake whilst also acknowledging that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, as rights holder for the original film, could do whatever they wished with the property. He confirmed his lack of input in the project stating that he “created the character and nurtured the franchise for three decades. So when someone says [...] we would love to have your name on the film, it was hard not to feel like I was being patronized. They just wanted our approval. Which I strenuously denied them.”<sup>415</sup> *Child's Play*, directed by Lars Klevberg, is both a remake and reboot of Holland's 1988 original.

Upon its release on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2019 *Child's Play* garnered largely positive reviews from critics.<sup>416</sup> Simran Hans suggested it had revitalised the Chucky series through “gently twisting its

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<sup>411</sup> Cory Metcalfe, “Child's Play Rewatch – Curse of Chucky,” Golden Spiral Media, June 20, 2019, <https://www.goldenspiralmedia.com/rw-278-childs-play-rewatch-curse-of-chucky>.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid.

<sup>413</sup> The exact reason for this is unknown but the negative fan and critical reception to similar remakes, notably Samuel Mayer's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), may have played a part in the decision.

<sup>414</sup> Costas Despotakis, “Child's Play Trivia: 45 Facts About the New Chucky Movie!,” Useless Daily, June 21, 2019, <https://www.uselessdaily.com/movies/childs-play-trivia-45-facts-about-the-new-chucky-movie/>.

<sup>415</sup> Mark Kermode, “Child's Play reviewed by Mark Kermode,” June 21, 2019, in *Kermode and Mayo's Film Review*, produced by Somethin' Else Sound Directions, podcast, MP3 audio, 01.23, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07dtn9g>.

<sup>416</sup> Coincidentally the same release date as Josh Cooley's animated feature film *Toy Story 4*. Hopefully there was no confusion over which sentient toy narrative with a child protagonist called Andy was which.

central conceit to reflect more contemporary anxieties.”<sup>417</sup> Anton Bitel noted how the film’s conclusion laid the groundwork for a potential sequel,<sup>418</sup> yet “stands on its own two feet” due to its “winning performances [...] witty writing [...] [and] bloodier set-pieces” which “quickly, quirkily makes a friend of even the most remake-weary horror viewer.”<sup>419</sup> While Nick Allen reasoned that *Child’s Play* is clearly a by-product of the ongoing success of 1980s nostalgia-driven horror narratives,<sup>420</sup> concluding that it “is one of those rare modern horror remakes that is more inspired than it is soulless.”<sup>421</sup> Mark Kermode likewise drew this comparison and praised the conscious nostalgic framing of its scares,<sup>422</sup> concluding that “if you’re somebody who grew up on banned video nasties there’s a sort of throwback retro gore charm to it.”<sup>423</sup> Ben Kenigsberg was much harsher in his critique of *Child’s Play* as “a soulless remake.”<sup>424</sup> Criticising the doll’s technological upgrade he contended that the now plausible reason for Chucky’s violent behaviour paradoxically made the film less scary, concluding that “in trying to build a smarter Chucky, the filmmakers have assembled something unfathomably dumb.”<sup>425</sup>

Pitched by Klevberg as “*ET* on Acid”<sup>426</sup> this re-imagining outwardly preserves strong connections with its primary narrative. Once again advertising plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer desire for the must-have toy, and the film largely follows a similar storyline to the

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<sup>417</sup> Simran Hans, “*Child’s Play* Review: A Chucky for the Techno-Fear Age,” *The Observer*, June 23, 2019, <https://go-gale-com.hull.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=unihull&id=GALE|A590339534&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>.

<sup>418</sup> *Child’s Play* concludes with the launch of Buddi 2.

<sup>419</sup> Anton Bitel, “*Child’s Play* (2019),” *Projected Figures*, August 10, 2019, <https://projectedfigures.com/2019/08/10/childs-play-2019/>.

<sup>420</sup> Of which Netflix phenomenon *Stranger Things* (2016-2024) and Andrés Muschietti’s *It* (2017), and its sequel *It Chapter Two* (2019) are clear examples.

<sup>421</sup> Nick Allen, “*Child’s Play*,” Roger Ebert, June 21, 2019, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/childs-play-2019>.

<sup>422</sup> However, he was arguably less favourable “when this is at its best it is like bad *Toy Story*.” - Mark Kermode, “*Child’s Play* reviewed by Mark Kermode,” June 21, 2019, in *Kermode and Mayo’s Film Review*, produced by Somethin’ Else Sound Directions, podcast, MP3 audio, 04.02, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07dtn9g>.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 05.33.

<sup>424</sup> Ben Kenigsberg, “*Child’s Play*,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2019, <https://go-gale-com.hull.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&u=unihull&id=GALE|A589920299&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>426</sup> Whitney Shoemaker, “‘Child’s Play’ Director Pitched ‘E.T. on Acid’ For Upcoming Reboot,” *Alternative Press*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.altpress.com/childs-play-pop-up-facts-trailer/>.

original with this Chucky's weapon of choice also a knife. One significant revision is to the doll itself; in place of a possessed Good Guy there is now an uncontrollable robotic doll called Buddi. In this reimagining technology has replaced the supernatural as the narrative taps into contemporary fears surrounding digital surveillance and artificial intelligence. When asked about the rationale behind this technological upgrade Klevberg commented: "I think that every good horror movie connects to its generation [...] we all trust devices like Alexa to control all the electronics in our homes [...] what if that device took on a human form and could walk around? Then it would be something completely different [...] our film is just taking that concept to another level."<sup>427</sup> A century on from Freud's pivotal observation on the relationship between childhood play, dolls, and the uncanny, our human desires and fears have now "become attached to the objects, products and commodities that populate our everyday lives."<sup>428</sup> In *Child's Play* Klevberg takes this progression to its blood-spattered conclusion.

Over the past few decades the world has become progressively more networked, "its distant and diverse regions having been linked together into a constant flow of information exchange facilitated by the internet, GPS-enabled camera phones, camcorders, CCTV surveillance devices and new online shopping, banking and communication practices."<sup>429</sup> As society reaps the palpable benefits of this digital age, horror cinema has increasingly grappled with the twin threat posed by the possibility of modern technologies gone awry, and our increased dependence on technologies which "have come not to serve our needs but to monitor and putatively shape our activities and sense of ourselves."<sup>430</sup> Catherine Zimmer argues that surveillance now figures centrally in horror narratives "as an organizational model predicated on the production of

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<sup>427</sup> James Carter, "Interview: Director Lars Klevberg for *Child's Play*," *Nightmarish Conjurings*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.nightmarishconjurings.com/2019/04/18/interview-director-lars-klevberg-for-childs-play/>.

<sup>428</sup> Goodluck, "Valley of the Uncanny Dolls."

<sup>429</sup> Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes, "Introduction: Horror in the Digital Age", in *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic, and the Found Footage Phenomenon*, eds. Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes (London: I.B. Taurus & Co., 2016), 1.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid*, 6.



uncertainty, ambiguity, instability.”<sup>431</sup> From “Norman Bates’s peephole in *Psycho* and Mark Lewis’s 16mm camera”<sup>432</sup> in *Peeping Tom* (1960), to the video surveillance systems of *Sliver* (1993), *Vacancy* (2007), and *Captivity* (2007), as Zimmer observes, “technologies of surveillance have served as a frequent narrative trope in slasher horror and have been almost invariably identified with the killer’s pathological murderousness.”<sup>433</sup> Intriguing examples of this trend abound. *FearDotCom* (2002) “posits a haunted internet, the ghost of a serial killer’s victim exacting her vengeance on those who log onto the eponymous torture-murder site.”<sup>434</sup> In *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002) Michael Myers confronts the cast and crew of internet reality television spectacle *Dangertainment* which has begun broadcasting from his abandoned childhood home. *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) is, as Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes discern, “deeply invested in the exploration of networks of surveillance, control, consumption and communication.”<sup>435</sup> In slasher horror *The Den* (2013),<sup>436</sup> a young woman’s academic exploration into the behaviours of chatroom users swiftly leads to multiple murders. Meanwhile, the gameshow horror *My Little Eye* (2002) “uses CCTV footage to revivify the slasher genre while voicing grave concerns about the manipulability of the subject of surveillance culture.”<sup>437</sup>

Following this lead, *Child’s Play* utilises these technologies of surveillance, specifically smart toys.<sup>438</sup> This time around not only is the doll a must have toy, but it is also a means of surveillance marketed as affection.<sup>439</sup> Contemporary developers of such toys actively encourage parents to

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<sup>431</sup> Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 50.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Blake and Aldana Reyes, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>436</sup> Also known as *Hacked*.

<sup>437</sup> Blake and Aldana Reyes, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>438</sup> A ‘smart toy’ is defined “as a device consisting of a physical toy component that connects to one or more toy computing services to facilitate gameplay in the Cloud through networking and sensory technologies to enhance the functionality of a traditional toy.” - Patrick C. K. Hung, Jeff K. T. Tang, and Kamen Kanev, “Introduction”, in *Computing in Smart Toys*, eds. Jeff K. T. Tang, and Patrick C. K. Hung (Cham: Springer, 2007), 1. Examples include Tiger Electronic’s Furby, Mattel’s Hello Barbie, and Lego’s Mindstorms.

<sup>439</sup> As typified by The Elf on the Shelf craze; first published in 2005, Carol Aebersold and Chanda Bell’s picture book *The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition* has since become a mainstay of many an American and British family’s festive season. The book comes with an accompanying doll which helps “Santa manage his nice list by taking note

purchase these smart toys as a means of keeping their child safe.<sup>440</sup> As Gary T. Marx and Valerie Steeves note, “there is a secondary emphasis on parental convenience and freedom, [...] [but] surveillance is predominately offered as a necessary tool of responsible and loving parenting.”<sup>441</sup> As technologies continue to evolve and our dependence on them increases, provoking a seemingly endless supply of macabre responses, horror narratives will surely continue to reflect this.

Ahead of *Child's Play's* release, Orion Pictures launched BestBuddi.com, part promotional website for the upcoming remake, part product advertisement. BestBuddi.com functioned, for fictional manufacturer Kaslan, as a promotional website for their latest state-of-the-art interactive doll.<sup>442</sup> As the site's faux merchandise materials explained, the dolls are no longer Good Guys but Buddis. The site revealed that each doll “comes equipped with a highly intricate cloud-backed voice recognition engine capable of identifying speech.”<sup>443</sup> It also stated that “using sophisticated Kaslan algorithms Buddi can comprehend inflection, tonality and subtle variations in the human voice” and can learn from both “human interaction and via its 20 sensors and cameras which provide detailed realtime information about its environment.”<sup>444</sup> Another apparent perk is that “your new best friend connects to and controls all your Kaslan products and smart home devices.”<sup>445</sup> The innovative nature of these Buddis is reiterated by the company's founder Henry

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of a family's Christmas adventures and reporting back to Santa at the North Pole nightly. Each morning, the Scout Elf returns to its family and perches in a new spot, waiting for someone to spot them. Children love to wake up and race around the house looking for their Scout Elf.” –“What is The Elf on the Shelf®?,” The Elf on the Shelf, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://elfontheshelf.com/christmas-tradition/>. Surveillance critics have been vocal in their condemnation of the doll with Laura Pinto and Selena Nemorin arguing that “The Elf on the Shelf brings in a new set of codes and norms into the child's play-world, and essentially teaches the child to accept an external form of non-familial surveillance in the home when the elf becomes the source of power and judgment.” - Laura Pinto and Selena Nemorin, “Normalizing Panoptic Surveillance Among Children,” *Our Schools Our Selves* 24:2 (2015): 57. The 2016 “The Nightmare After Krustmas” episode of *The Simpsons* macabrely parodies the craze through an ominous ‘Gnome in Your Home’ figure that terrifies Maggie.

<sup>440</sup> Xtreme Life's Teddy Bear model captures covert video footage in 4K and currently retails for around \$400.

<sup>441</sup> Gary T. Marx and Valerie Steeves, “From the Beginning: Children as Subjects and Agents of Surveillance,” *Surveillance & Society* 7:3/4 (June 2010): 193.

<sup>442</sup> Post-release the website now automatically redirects visitors to the film's official Instagram page.

<sup>443</sup> “Best Buddi,” Kaslan, accessed November 26, 2018, [www.bestbuddi.com](http://www.bestbuddi.com).

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

Kaslan (Tim Matheson) in the film's opening scene, during an advertisement which stresses that the doll's "state of the art A.I safeguards ensure that your children will also be safe."<sup>446</sup>

In *Child's Play* these Buddi dolls, and specifically Chucky (Mark Hamill) then, are the very manifestation of the 'Internet of Things.' Open to seemingly constant re-evaluation, the term 'Internet of Things' can currently be defined as "a conceptual framework that leverages on the availability of heterogeneous devices and interconnecting solutions, as well as augmented physical objects providing a shared information base on a global scale, to support the design of applications involving at the same virtual level both people and representations of objects."<sup>447</sup> More simply put, the 'Internet of Things' is an "intersection of people (meatspace), systems (cyberspace) and physical world (atomspace)."<sup>448</sup> Through this technology, Chucky can power connected technologies including smart televisions, security systems, self-driving automobiles, and crucially, other Buddi dolls. The interconnected nature of Chucky, and real-world devices like him, presents a new type of horror, as Goodluck observes, "back when products were inert, there was the plausible assumption that our ownership gave us dominion over them, and that the old ghosts of production that might emerge were simply chance occurrences."<sup>449</sup> *Child's Play* casts doubt on this, "at best, consumer products are now the expression of a new form of corporate hegemony that penetrates our homes, siphoning data to manipulate us into becoming better consumers. Or else through this network, there emerges the vengeful spirit of a nu-proletarian who acts through a technology that has become fundamental to our lives."<sup>450</sup> Crucially, contemporary society appears to willingly welcome these products into their lives, as demonstrated in *Child's Play*.

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<sup>446</sup> *Child's Play*, directed by Lars Klevberg, performances by Tim Matheson, Ben Daon, and Zahra Anderson (2019; Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures), DVD.

<sup>447</sup> Luigi Atzori, Antonio Iera, and Giacomo Morabito, "Understanding the Internet of Things: Definition, Potentials, and Societal Role of a Fast Evolving Paradigm," *Ad Hoc Networks* 56 (March 2017): 137.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>449</sup> Goodluck, "Valley of the Uncanny Dolls."

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid*.

Following on from this Kaslan announcement the opening sequence of *Child's Play* showcases the defective nature of this particular doll, thus, like the original, from the very beginning, the monstrous threat is made apparent. In this sequence, set in Kaslan's somewhat dystopian Vietnam sweatshop, an overworked and disgruntled employee removes the safety protocols, including "violence inhibitors"<sup>451</sup> from the doll he has just assembled, before placing it inside its box ready for sale. This sabotaged doll, seemingly now waiting to inflict violence upon an unsuspecting Western consumer. As Bitel discerns, the soon-to-be murderous doll here is therefore "a product of class revenge" which exposes "the gulf between the Buddi doll's slick corporate face, and the infernal, exploitative production line on which it is built."<sup>452</sup> This production line is akin to the ones that manufacture the latest must-have technological developments that fill our homes, and on which, we ourselves, increasingly rely. The consumer anxieties of the original film are amplified in this remake, for the doll is tainted from its inception, "and there is a recognisable anxiety that it is the production process itself that is compromised – due to being based on the mass-exploitation and immiseration of entire nations."<sup>453</sup> The anxieties that fuel *Child's Play* then, as Bitel suggests, "have their origins in the sense of guilt attached to the nefarious workings of global capitalism."<sup>454</sup> In the film this guilt arises in the hordes of middle-class consumers vying for the latest Kaslan product, and also within the working-class Barclay family, to horrific effect.

This corrupted doll soon finds its way into the workplace of widower Karen Barclay (Aubrey Plaza). After learning that it is due to be returned to the Kaslan headquarters for incineration, because "its eyes were red, something was wrong with it,"<sup>455</sup> she 'rescues' the doll, subsequently named Chucky, intending to give it to her son Andy (Gabriel Bateman) as a birthday

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<sup>451</sup> Klevberg, *Child's Play*.

<sup>452</sup> Bitel, "Child's Play (2019)."

<sup>453</sup> Goodluck, "Valley of the Uncanny Dolls."

<sup>454</sup> Bitel, "Child's Play (2019)."

<sup>455</sup> Klevberg, *Child's Play*.

gift.<sup>456</sup> This fixation upon the doll's eyes is significant,<sup>457</sup> the colour an evident visual marker of its inherent evil. Pre-empting the doll's initially glitchy, and later homicidal, tendencies, Karen cautions Andy to remember that "it's refurbished so it might not work perfectly."<sup>458</sup> Indeed Chucky's 'awakening' is far from seamless, rather the doll comes to life in a burst of error codes, against a soundtrack of technological whirring, flashing its blood-tinted eyes. This emergence, coupled with Chucky's subsequent imprinting upon him, leads Andy to conclude that the doll is "kinda creepy."<sup>459</sup> Not quite the outpouring of mutual friendship that the advertisement had promised: "when Buddy imprints on you he becomes your best friend for life."<sup>460</sup> In *Child's Play* the viewer's attention is repeatedly drawn to the doll's innate weirdness. Andy's response to Chucky's nighttime chorus of "you are my Buddi until the end [...] and I will never let you go" is stereotypically teenage: "totally not weird at all."<sup>461</sup> Upon awakening to find the doll standing ominously next to his bed he pleads "please close your eyes and pretend to be less creepy."<sup>462</sup> The appeal for both normality and humanity here is evident, yet ultimately futile for the allegedly seamless doll housed in the Barclay residence is tainted.

Peter Fleming in his book on the speculative developments of post-capitalist society, *The Worst is Yet to Come: A Post-Capitalist Survival Guide* declares that despite what science fiction may suggest, "robotics will not develop an 'evil intelligence' on their own."<sup>463</sup> Instead "they'll reflect the predilections of their human programmers," which "given the wickedness that people are capable of [...] [is] a far more worrying thought."<sup>464</sup> In 2018, Scientists at Massachusetts Institute

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<sup>456</sup> When Andy is first asked to name the doll he chooses Han Solo, yet the doll, voiced by *Star Wars* actor Mark Hamill, rejects the choice in favour of Chucky.

<sup>457</sup> The distinctiveness of the doll's eyes mean that they are later used to clarify his presence: "look at his eyes, that's Chucky" - Klevberg, *Child's Play*.

<sup>458</sup> Klevberg, *Child's Play*.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Peter Fleming, *The Worst is Yet to Come: A Post-Capitalist Survival Guide* (London: Repeater Books, 2019), 56.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

of Technology built image captioning software ‘Norman’, as part of an experiment on data training and “extended exposure to the darkest corners”<sup>465</sup> of the internet. The result is the “world’s first psychopath AI”<sup>466</sup> that “represents a case study on the dangers of artificial intelligence gone wrong when biased data is used in machine learning algorithms.”<sup>467</sup> *Child’s Play* follows this theorem to its bloody conclusion as the doll absorbs lessons from its environment rather than adhering to a pre-programmed path.

The doll’s difference is initially admired by Andy, he is pleased that unlike other Buddi dolls, Chucky “doesn’t really follow the rules” meaning “you can make him do whatever.”<sup>468</sup> The perhaps preordained, horrific consequences of this freedom are foreshadowed by a friend’s warning: “can I just point out that this is how every robot apocalypse scenario begins.”<sup>469</sup> Everyday mundane human actions are then replicated by the doll with horrifying results. Uninhibited by the limits of human rationality or morality, the doll’s simplistic understanding of the world leads it to repeatedly commit violent acts under the pretence of affection for its owner. Furthermore, the doll is unwavering in its distorted loyalty, “if I can’t be your best Buddi nobody can.”<sup>470</sup> After mistakenly recognising it as a threat to Andy, Chucky kills the Barclay’s family cat, stabbing it with a motion mimicked from watching Andy’s earlier culinary abuses. Manipulating the technology at hand for macabre means, Chucky crashes the driverless car that the family’s neighbour Doreen (Carlease Burke) is in, warning that “nobody steals my friend,”<sup>471</sup> before stabbing her to death.

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<sup>465</sup> “Norman,” MIT Media Lab, accessed June 24, 2022, <https://www.media.mit.edu/projects/norman/overview/>.

<sup>466</sup> “Explore What Norman Sees,” MIT Media Lab, accessed June 24, 2022, <http://norman-ai.mit.edu/>.

<sup>467</sup> MIT Media Lab, “Norman.”

<sup>468</sup> Klevberg, *Child’s Play*.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

In an evident reference to the ambiguous connections made by the British tabloid press between *Child's Play 3* and the horrific murder of toddler James Bulger,<sup>472</sup> the doll's education also comes from exposure to the horror films that Andy and his friends watch in its presence. Here, as Bitel discerns, "that dynamic is slyly inverted by having the doll 'Chucky' himself directly influenced in his gory murderous acts"<sup>473</sup> by Bill Johnson's iconic portrayal of mass-murdering cannibal Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (1986). As "this human-like automaton is manufactured not born, so too, as he absorbs all the micro-aggressions and violence around him, is his emergent psychopathy."<sup>474</sup> Chucky thus acts as an exemplar of Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui's reflection that "we are surrounded in the twenty-first century by technologies that, much like the monsters we create, seem to have achieved agency of their own."<sup>475</sup> This exposure culminates with the Leatherface inspired murder of Karen's boyfriend, Shane (David Lewis). Shane is shaken from the ladder he is using to remove Christmas lights from the roof of his family home, and this fall situates him in the path of an oncoming lawnmower, from which, bound by these lights, he cannot escape. Chucky materialises and brags again that "nobody hurts my best buddy"<sup>476</sup> as the blades repetitively slice into Shane's head.

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<sup>472</sup> James Patrick Bulger from Kirkby, Merseyside, was two-years old when he was abducted, tortured, and murdered by two ten-year old boys, Robert Thompson, and Jon Venables, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1993. Thompson and Venables ushered Bulger away from his mother at a local shopping centre, two days later his mutilated body was found on a nearby railway line. The Newson Report of April 1994, produced in the wake of the Bulger case, "contributed directly to the amendment of the Criminal Justice Bill in June of that year, making provision for much tougher censorship of videos." - Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (London: Arnold, 2002), 4. During the trial the judge hypothesised over what had prompted Thompson and Venables to kill, "he wondered if there wasn't a connection with violent videos. He didn't mention any particular films, but the press had been primed, and one film, *Child's Play 3*, became their target. However, it soon became clear that, despite police efforts, there was not a scrap of evidence that the boys had watched the film." – Jones, *Horror*, 4. Despite the lack of concrete evidence, many UK retailers pulled copies of *Child's Play 3* from their shelves in the wake of this controversy.

<sup>473</sup> Anton Bitel, "Child's Play," *Sight and Sound*, (August 2019): 65.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

<sup>475</sup> Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, "Introduction: Toward a Comprehensive Monster Theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", in *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 9.

<sup>476</sup> Klevberg, *Child's Play*.

The next morning Andy finds this decapitated head, gift-wrapped atop his dresser, the mouth agape, a ghoulish preservation of Shane's final pained expression. Andy's distress at this surprise gift from Chucky is palpable, the doll's misguided loyalty likewise apparent, "now we can play again. I'd do anything for my best Buddi."<sup>477</sup> Andy's plea to inform the police of Chucky's actions is met with derision by his friends, who irrespective of their own beliefs, stress the implausibility of a killer doll alibi, "your toy went full-blown psycho killer, sure, let's see how that goes."<sup>478</sup> When he later confides in his mother about Chucky's homicidal tendencies, she is equally dismissive, "sweetie, chucky is a toy [...] it broke, we got rid of it."<sup>479</sup> Andy's outrage at not being believed, "nobody's listening to me. He's trying to kill us,"<sup>480</sup> is complex. The dismissal of his anxiety as mere adolescent fantasy is illustrative of a broader fear that he as a hearing-impaired person is already habitually, and unjustly, silenced.<sup>481</sup>

These horrors culminate in Karen's workplace, Zed Mart, a superstore akin to Playland Toys. This time around, it is both the setting for the launch of the highly anticipated Buddi 2.0 doll, and the bloody massacre that follows it. Chucky, in an attempt to get to Andy and those around him, infiltrates the store, hacks into its security, and employs its technology for horrific ends. Parallels can be drawn here with Jim Wynorsk's techno-horror slasher *Chopping Mall* (1986) as the store's ostensibly harmless inhabitants mortally attack the consumer.<sup>482</sup> As terrified customers flee from the army of Buddi dolls that Chucky has marshalled, an army now free from the constraints of pesky safety protocols, Andy vows to rescue his mother from the maniacal doll's clutches.

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> This fear is exploited further in the Zed Mart scene when Buddi hacks into the software controlling Andy's hearing aid. As customers flee from the carnage the doll has created, Buddi utilises technology to communicate directly with Andy, stressing his supposed devotion, he notes that "they're all leaving you, but not me." - Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> In *Chopping Mall* state-of-the-art security robots turn on the teenage employees of a shopping centre with gruesome consequences.



The hide and seek horror show that follows makes full use of the eerie nature of the doll's disembodied voice, as it taunts Andy with echoes of "getting closer," whilst other toys are deployed to deliver ominous warnings, "dead or alive you're coming with me."<sup>483</sup> Andy's darkly comedic pledge to Chucky, "you wanna play? Let's play,"<sup>484</sup> is fulfilled in the film's final minutes, as he stabs Chucky in the chest, destroying the doll's lifeforce. Sparks fly as the doll's fragmented voice proclaims "Andy [...] you are the worst friend."<sup>485</sup> Like its predecessor, Chucky's death here is also protracted. The doll is stabbed, shot, and beheaded before its head is taken outside and smashed apart with baseball bats and hammers. This repetitive violence enables each of the injured parties to enact their own form of revenge upon the doll's broken body. In the tradition of what came before then, *Child's Play* concludes that when it comes to this particular doll, one 'killing' is not enough.

Through this protracted murder, Klevberg skillfully highlights the anxiety at the very centre of the *Child's Play* franchise, that Chucky cannot die. As Goodluck observes:

No matter how thoroughly his plastic form is scorched, stabbed, shattered and otherwise broken, he is easily replicated and repaired, making him a figure capable of endless reinvention and revival. There is always a new vessel for Chucky's soul, or his software, to possess. After all, the one thing that is produced faster than human beings are our consumer products, with plastic bodies far more durable and long-lasting than our own flesh. In all of the films, there is the Gothic promise that junk, the wretched, the unwashed masses and the monsters are in fact our children and their toys.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Klevberg, *Child's Play*.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> Goodluck, "Valley of the Uncanny Dolls."

Seemingly unstoppable, for even when beaten, burnt, and mutilated, Chucky somehow finds a means of escape. As Grant jests, “charred Chucky keeps coming, like a tiny Terminator.”<sup>487</sup> After this atrocity the production of Buddi dolls is temporarily suspended, though an investigation has concluded that Kaslan bears “no responsibility for the horrific events that transpired at Zed Mart.”<sup>488</sup> The founder’s assertion that Kaslan believes “that every child deserves a friend for life. A friend that will never leave them. A friend to the end”<sup>489</sup> is spliced against footage of their newest release, a tableau vivant of ostensibly identical Buddi dolls. Upon closer inspection, one of the dolls possesses the defective attribute of its predecessor, red eyes. Evidently this particularly doll’s story is not yet ready to end.

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<sup>487</sup> Grant, *100 American Horror Films*, 43.

<sup>488</sup> Klevberg, *Child’s Play*.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* states that in our common cultural subconscious we are constantly aware that “the monster always escapes ... [and that] its monstrous progeny will return, ready to stalk again in another bigger-than-ever-sequel.”<sup>490</sup> Chucky’s pursuit appears unstoppable, indeed, whether on the cinematic or small screen, the iconic red-haired doll continues to permeate contemporary culture at a rapid rate.<sup>491</sup> Furthermore, this monstrous progeny has evolved, as it appears to have shed the shackles of its master. “Forget Dr. Frankenstein” instructs Victoria Nelson, for killer puppets are now “casting off their now--superfluous human agents, acquiring supernatural powers along with their freedom,” the established roles of creator and creation disrupted by these “newly independent and increasingly omnipotent simulacra.”<sup>492</sup> The influence of Chucky cannot be understated. As Crystal Ponti observes, *Child’s Play* “set the standard for cinematic dolls as objects that are both menacing on their own terms—with their vacant grins and distorted features—and also as reflections of a darkness that’s much more human than many viewers will want to believe.”<sup>493</sup> This duality had a fundamental and lasting impact on the multitude of contemporary ‘living’ doll horror narratives which followed.

Furthermore, Chucky’s position as celebrated horror monster is irrefutable, a role established in *Child’s Play*, and largely strengthened through subsequent sequels and adaptations. As Staats asserts “*Child’s Play*’s contribution to, and by extension the proper place of *Child’s Play* within the pantheon of, the modern horror film is that the devil-doll can kill as effectively as

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<sup>490</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>491</sup> With rumours of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* crossover, *Child’s Play on Elm Street*, alongside further proposed sequels, this looks set to continue.

<sup>492</sup> Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, 258.

<sup>493</sup> Crystal Ponti, “Child’s Play and the Very Human Horror of Creepy Dolls,” *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2018, [https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/11/childs-play-chucky-creepy-dolls-history/575374/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_content=edit-promo&utm\\_term=2018-11-10T12%3A00%3A19&utm\\_campaign=the-atlantic&utm\\_source=twitter](https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/11/childs-play-chucky-creepy-dolls-history/575374/?utm_medium=social&utm_content=edit-promo&utm_term=2018-11-10T12%3A00%3A19&utm_campaign=the-atlantic&utm_source=twitter).

celebrity slashers.”<sup>494</sup> The tendency of the horror genre to transform seemingly mundane objects into malevolent forces is well documented, indeed at times these objects become iconically associated with not only the narrative, but its surrounding mythology; picture the red balloons of Stephen King’s *IT* (1986) or Ghostface’s mask in *Scream* (1996). With *Child’s Play* Holland took this association a step further creating, in Chucky, an iconic villain, who serves as a chilling “reminder that dolls have been a mainstay of the genre for decades, in part because of how they tap into fears about corrupted innocence and bodily possession. At their best, creepy-doll movies underscore the notion that however plasticine or artificial the conduit, the evil and horror on display is inherently human.”<sup>495</sup> In the case of *Child’s Play*, Ray’s corporeal body may be gone, but his mannerisms, specifically his husky voice, psychotic cackle, and dark sense of humour, endure in Chucky.

Chucky is a Frankensteinian figure fit, as this chapter has demonstrated, for an era of thriving capitalism. At its best, Kord argues, the horror genre skilfully portrays “the profound confusion that has arisen in the consumerist age between people and things.”<sup>496</sup> In an age where “children turn themselves into product, dolls turn into people”<sup>497</sup> the distinction between previously established corporeal boundaries is becoming increasingly blurred. Both the original *Child’s Play* and its remake cleverly undermine the societal credence of consumerism through the figure of the consumed doll. The must-have toy of the season is in fact, that, which will incriminate its owner in a murder investigation, yet will remain innocuous, protected by the guise of a child’s toy that no one deems necessary to scrutinise.

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<sup>494</sup> Staats, “Re-envisioning the Devil-Doll,” 65.

<sup>495</sup> Ponti, “*Child’s Play* and the Very Human Horror.”

<sup>496</sup> Kord, *Little Horrors*, 135.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Chapter Two: Doll as Fetishized Object**

“Got myself a cryin', talkin', sleepin', walkin', livin' doll  
Got to do my best to please her just 'cause she's a livin' doll  
Got a rovin' eye and that is why she satisfies my soul  
Got the one and only walkin', talkin', livin' doll”<sup>498</sup>

### **Cliff Richard, ‘Living Doll’**

“Coin operated boy, sitting on the shelf  
He is just a toy but I turn him on and he comes to life  
Automatic joy that is why I want  
A coin operated boy  
Made of plastic and elastic  
He is rugged and long lasting  
Who could ever ever ask for more?  
Love without complications galore”<sup>499</sup>

### **The Dresden Dolls, ‘Coin-Operated Boy’**

The figure of the erotic doll populates our cultural milieu. Marquard Smith in his historical study of the topic *The Erotic Doll: A Modern Fetish*, for example, identifies, “the fine and plastic arts of the Chapman Brothers, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Inez van Lamsweerde, Sarah Lucas, Pal McCarthy, Takashi Murakami, Cindy Sherman [...] Hannah Wilkes [...] [and] the televisual and cinematic cultures of *Nip/Tuck*, *30 Rock* and *Lars and the Real Doll*.”<sup>500</sup> From Daphne

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<sup>498</sup> Cliff Richard, “Living Doll,” track 2 on *Living Doll*, EMI, 1998, compact disc.

<sup>499</sup> The Dresden Dolls, “Coin-Operated Boy,” track 6 on *The Dresden Dolls*, 8ft. Records, 2004, compact disc.

<sup>500</sup> Marquard Smith, *The Erotic Doll: A Modern Fetish* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 11.

du Maurier's newly rediscovered short story 'The Doll' (1937)<sup>501</sup> to Alissa Nutting's satirical novel *Made for Love* (2017), from Mattel's 'Growing up Skipper' doll<sup>502</sup> to the commercial manufacture of sex dolls for private use, fetishized dolls are everywhere. Smith contends that "here, today, the doll is fetishistic, erotic, melancholic, queer, critical, perverse, straight, parodic, banal, provocative-ubiquitous."<sup>503</sup> The erotic doll figure then, rebuffs binaries, refuses easy categorisation, and is continually in flux.

This chapter focuses upon the doll's function as a fetishized object, the word 'fetish' coming from the Portuguese "feitiço" meaning "charm" or "made thing."<sup>504</sup> The term itself is multi-layered. Andrea Dworkin defines fetish as "a magical, symbolic object"<sup>505</sup> in line with its early occult associations. Smith terms it "an animated entity," one that "is manipulable, interactive and participatory [...] In today's critical parlance, it is an 'evocative object', a 'non-human actant', a 'quasi-object'."<sup>506</sup> This study, acknowledging these explanations, adopts the definition of fetish as "a form of sexual behaviour or desire which is stimulated or gratified by a particular inanimate object,"<sup>507</sup> in this case, the doll. The following examination of select texts provides an overview of the type of doll-centric narratives that are pertinent to this discussion of fetishization.

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<sup>501</sup> In 2011 bookseller and Du Maurier enthusiast Ann Willmore unearthed five short stories that Du Maurier had written during the 1930s. Willmore had been searching for one of those, "The Doll", ever since she read a reference to it in Du Maurier's 1977 autobiography *Myself When Young: The Shaping of a Writer*. Willmore states that she had "searched for it a million times before [...] but quite by chance it turned up in a 1937 collection of stories rejected by magazines and publishers called *The Editor Regrets*. I was dumbfounded." – Lindsay Irvine, "Lost Daphne du Maurier stories discovered," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/21/daphne-du-maurier-stories-discovered>. *The Doll: Short Stories* was subsequently published by Virago in 2011.

<sup>502</sup> In 1974 toy manufacturer Mattel brought out a younger sister for Barbie, named Skipper. In 1975 they released a 'growing up' version which developed breasts when Skipper's left arm was moved forward, rotate it backwards and the doll converted back to her pre-pubescent state. Mattel faced criticism for sexualising an adolescent body and this model was discontinued in 1977.

<sup>503</sup> Smith, *The Erotic Doll*, 11.

<sup>504</sup> The Portuguese adjective stemming from the Latin "*facticius* "made by art, artificial," from *facere* "to make, do, produce." - "Fetish (n.)," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/fetish>.

<sup>505</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1992), 123.

<sup>506</sup> Smith, *The Erotic Doll*, 10.

<sup>507</sup> "Fetish, n.," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed July 25, 2023, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fetish\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#4377609](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fetish_n?tab=meaning_and_use#4377609).

Ostensibly inherent to the fictional depiction of these fetishized dolls is the element of objectification. As Julie Wosk notes over the course of the twentieth century “objectification and segmentation [...] would continue to be a central feature in men’s cultural representations of woman-as-doll.”<sup>508</sup> Male artists, in other words, frequently saw the female body “as doll- like”<sup>509</sup> as something to be “manipulated and played with.”<sup>510</sup> Artist Hans Bellmer’s pubescent female fetish dolls continue to elicit controversy, intrigue, and often, horror in the contemporary viewer. Bellmer deemed the figure of the doll to be an irrefutably evocative object that engenders “confusion between the animate and inanimate” stating that “it must be a question of the thing personified, mobile, passive, adaptable and incomplete.”<sup>511</sup> In 1933 Bellmer constructed his first doll from papier-mâché and plaster cast over a wood and metal frame. Each part of this doll was designed to be disassembled and reconfigured, in fact “Bellmer cannibalized the head, hands and legs”<sup>512</sup> of ‘Die Puppe’ (1934) to make his second ‘La Poupee’ (1935). This second creation was “painted to resemble flesh. More flexible than the first doll, it consisted of various joints and appendages pivoting around a central ball joint.”<sup>513</sup> These dolls were the starting point for more than thirty distinct photographs, and as Theresa Lichtenstein observes, they “perform a series of tableaux vivants that stage unsettling scenes and alternate orderings of the female body.”<sup>514</sup> In his work Bellmer positions the doll as both innocent and seductive, rejects distinct categories of woman and child, and thus “elicits a dramatic ambivalence between desire for and revulsion at the female body.”<sup>515</sup> Within these images the doll, and thus its female counterpart, is reduced to the sum of its sexual anatomy as breasts, limbs, and buttocks are hung, spread, or contorted in a deliberately provocative manner.

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<sup>508</sup> Julie Wosk, *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Hans Bellmer, *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (Paris: Editions Premières, 1949), 16.

<sup>512</sup> Theresa Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 21

<sup>513</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid, 13.

Similarly, Oskar Kokoschka reconfigured the eroticised female body through his Alma doll, a fetish, “made in the image of his ex-lover: an object of erotic longing he generated first to worship, then to eliminate.”<sup>516</sup> In response to his lover, Alma Mahler, leaving him for another man, Kokoschka commissioned dollmaker Hermine Moos to make a doppelgänger to Mahler’s exact proportions. He meticulously directed the doll’s construction through “detailed sketches, diagrams, anatomical drawings and poetic similes.”<sup>517</sup> He referred to it as his ‘lover’ and ‘fetish’ and insisted that she “must be made perfect and luxuriant [...] otherwise it is not to be a woman but a monster.”<sup>518</sup> The doll however was covered in an outer layer of swanskin, the feathers obscuring any lifelikeness it may have possessed. Kokoschka was disgusted:

The outer shell is a polar-bear pelt, suitable for a shaggy imitation bedside rug rather than the soft and pliable skin of a woman [...] the result is that I cannot even dress the doll, which you knew was my intention, let alone array her in delicate and precious robes. Even attempting to pull on one stocking would be like asking a French dancing-master to waltz with a polar bear.<sup>519</sup>

The finished doll was not the fetish that Kokoschka had desired, rather, as Bonnie Roos underscores, it was “more precisely a ‘fetish’ object, in line with imported (or stolen) artifacts and ‘primitive’ art.”<sup>520</sup> Still Kokoschka exchanged reality for fetish, as “he escorted his doll to the opera, held parties in its honor, and hired a maid to dress and service it,”<sup>521</sup> which inevitably “inspired rampant speculation about what else, exactly, Kokoschka did with the doll.”<sup>522</sup> After one such party police questioned Kokoschka about a suspected murder, “a beheaded and

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<sup>516</sup> Jane Munro, *Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 10.

<sup>517</sup> Bonnie Roos, “Oskar Kokoschka’s Sex Toy: The Women and the Doll Who Conceived the Artist,” *Modernism/Modernity* 12:2 (April 2005): 296.

<sup>518</sup> Maria Hummel “The Silent Woman,” CrimeReads, June 1, 2021, <https://crimereads.com/alma-mahler/>.

<sup>519</sup> Suzanne Keegan, *The Eye of God: A Life of Oskar Kokoschka* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 114-115.

<sup>520</sup> Roos, “Oskar Kokoschka’s Sex Toy,” 300.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*



bloody body was reportedly seen outside his home. Evidently it was the naked, wine-splattered doll, which had somehow lost its head during the revelries of the previous evening.”<sup>523</sup> These dolls are, as Smith observes, symbolic of a long established fetishistic culture whose “genealogy goes from late nineteenth-century commercial shop-window dummies [...] and the surrealist mannequins of the 1920s and 30s, to current [mass-produced but also bespoke] dolls and artificial body parts manufactured by the sex industry.”<sup>524</sup>

Sexual attraction to inert human forms, or agalmatophilia, is nothing new. Detailed in Pygmalion’s adoration of the ideal female figure in Ovid’s ‘Metamorphosis’ (8 AD), it can also be seen later in E. T. A Hoffman’s ‘The Sandman’ (1816) which details a young man, Nathanael’s, infatuation with an uncannily lifelike wooden doll Olympia. The legacy of these texts, and ones like them, permeate contemporary interpretations of the erotic doll figure. Daphne du Maurier’s short story ‘The Doll’ (1937) disrupts gender norms as it depicts a young girl, Rebecca’s, infatuation with a mechanical doll, Julio. The narrator of the tale, infatuated with Rebecca, determines Julio to be “the most evil thing” with “the face of a satyr, a grinning hateful satyr.”<sup>525</sup> Meanwhile, in his sadistic fantasies he envisions Rebecca in doll-like terms, with lifeless eyes and parted lips, pondering “how easy it would be to [...] strangle her.”<sup>526</sup> Du Maurier’s tale is an innovative prediction of the sex doll narrative, conceived decades prior to this now-thriving cultural phenomenon.

In Ramsey Campbell’s short story ‘Cyril’ (1969) a woman named Flora, frustrated with her relationship, inadvertently brings a doll to life to satisfy her sexual desires with horrifying consequences. Ira Levin’s novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972) satirises perceptions of the ideal woman. In it a Stepford husband, fearful of feminism’s supposedly sinister influence, sets about

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> Smith, *The Erotic Doll*, 21.

<sup>525</sup> Daphne du Maurier, *The Doll: Short Stories* (London: Virago Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>526</sup> Du Maurier, *The Doll*, 17.

replacing the town's wives with subservient, sycophantic, and impossibly beautiful animatronic dolls. In J. G. Ballard's 'The Smile' (1982) boundaries between natural and artificial blur as a man discovers that his beloved companion doll, Serena, is a taxidermized girl. Chester Novell Turner's blaxploitation horror film *Black Devil Doll from Hell* (1984) portrays how a supposedly haunted ventriloquist's doll, through an act of sexual violence, unexpectedly awakens the desires of an ostensibly prudish young woman.

A. M. Homes's short story 'A Real Doll' (1990) fetishizes an iconic childhood toy. It details the horrifying consequences of an adolescent boy's erotic obsession with his sister's Barbie doll. In Robert Coover's *Pinocchio in Venice* (1991), a postmodern sequel to Carlo Collodi's classic tale, Pinocchio's nose is the joyfully obscene showpiece of Coover's narrative, operating not merely as phallic emblem, nor only as a literal phallus, but as the pivotal defining aspect of his own sexual identity. 'The Dollmaker' is the principal antagonist of American McGee's psychological horror video game *Alice: Madness Returns* (2000), in it he is "performing a service"<sup>527</sup> transforming children into subservient dolls to be sold to paedophiles. In Robert Parigi's *Love Object* (2003), social recluse Kenneth attempts to embalm his human ex-girlfriend Lisa, hoping to transform her into her custom-made sex doll doppelgänger, Nikki. Similarly, Joyce Carol Oats' novel *Zombie* (1995) fictionalises Jeffrey Dahmer's notorious acts of murder and necrophilia.<sup>528</sup> Dahmer later admitted that he had trained himself "to view people as objects of potential pleasure instead of people."<sup>529</sup> Nikki, alongside other cinematic sex dolls, most notably Bianca in *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), literalises the "to-be-looked-at-ness"<sup>530</sup> that Laura Mulvey identifies "as the definitive feature of the female romantic object in Hollywood cinema

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<sup>527</sup> Spicy Horse, *Alice: Madness Returns*, Electronic Arts, PC, 2011.

<sup>528</sup> American Jeffrey Dahmer (1960–1994), also known as the Milwaukee Cannibal or Milwaukee Monster, murdered seventeen male victims between 1978 and 1991. He engaged in sexual activity with the victims before and after their deaths and then dismembered their bodies, before either preserving or cannibalising them.

<sup>529</sup> Brian Masters, *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), 92.

<sup>530</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16:3 (Autumn 1975): 11.

[...] the apparatus of cinema—its desire turning person into prop—is literalized.<sup>531</sup> For Mulvey these women in “their traditional exhibitionist role [...] are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.”<sup>532</sup> The proliferation of this in cinema is such that a woman exhibited as a sexual entity has become “the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.”<sup>533</sup> Eroticism, horror, and the ‘living’ doll figure are inherently interlinked, with a myriad of examples populating literature, film, television, and the visual arts.

Ross Chambers in his study of western fictions of artificial life stresses the importance of understanding the “difference between artificial life that is perceived as a *surrogate*, an inferior imitation of the real thing, and artificial life that is perceived as threatening, and activates castration anxiety, because, as a *supplementation* of the natural, it implies a lack or deficiency on the side of the original [...] a deficiency or lack that must at all costs be denied.”<sup>534</sup> He argues that this difference is inherently gendered for “it is female artificial life that is viewed by male characters as glamorous and surrogate, male artificial life that is presented as creepy and threatening.”<sup>535</sup> However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the fictional erotic doll does not consistently adhere to this binary, indeed, it frequently subverts it, for within the fiction studied here these female surrogates are portrayed as both alluring and disturbing. This chapter will explore the notion of doll as fetish object through close examination of three Gothic narratives: Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop* (1967); her short story ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ (1974); and Ramsey Campbell’s ‘Lilith’s’ (1987). In each of these texts the doll is employed as a grotesquely erotic figure, that embodies the sinister

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<sup>531</sup> Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, “Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Love: *Lars and the Real Girl*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *Mulholland Drive*,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 43:2 (Fall 2013): 19.

<sup>532</sup> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 11.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>534</sup> Ross Chambers, “The Queer and the Creepy: Western Fictions of Artificial Life,” *Pacific Coast Philology*, 40:1 (2005): 25.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*

uncanny nature of a performing object, and thus elicits fears surrounding the manipulated, mutilated, and mutated body. This chapter focuses on the erotic nature of the 'living' doll figure and explores the objectification inherent in this portrayal. Alongside discussion of literal dolls, it will examine how, in the oppressive patriarchal settings that Carter and Campbell construct, women are seemingly subjugated to the status of doll-like beings.

## “We Live in Gothic Times”: The Fiction of Angela Carter

In the afterword to her first collection of short stories *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974), Angela Carter memorably proclaimed that “we live in Gothic times.”<sup>536</sup> Carter’s perception of those Gothic times was not limited to that uncanny sense of unease at the familiar becoming unfamiliar and thus unnerving, rather, as Emma Pi-tai Peng asserts, it included an underlying “anxiety about the radical socio-cultural change”<sup>537</sup> of the period. Gothic fiction, as previously discussed,<sup>538</sup> is often distinguished by an ambivalence of fear and desire whose terror and horror, as Fred Botting identifies, “have depended on things not being what they seem.”<sup>539</sup> The anxiety here centres upon the idea that:

Things are not only not what they seem: what they seem is what they are, not a unity of word or image and thing, but words and images without things or as things ourselves, effects of narrative form and nothing else. Unstable, unfixed and ungrounded in any reality, truth or identity other than those that narratives provide, there emerges a threat of sublime excess, of a new darkness of multiple and labyrinthine narratives, in which human myths again dissolve, confronted by an uncanny force beyond its control.<sup>540</sup>

Carter amplifies this unsettling uncertainty in her postmodern Gothic fiction.

In Carter’s work the Gothic is everywhere; she gives us “castles, werewolves, vampires, marionettes coming to life, transvestites and transsexuals, deep forests, incest, twinning, mirroring

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<sup>536</sup> Angela Carter, *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (London: Quarter Books Limited, 1974), 122.

<sup>537</sup> Emma Pi-tai Peng, “Angela Carter’s Postmodern Feminism and the Gothic Uncanny,” *NTU Studies in Language and Literature*, 13 (June 2004): 118.

<sup>538</sup> See introduction.

<sup>539</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 170.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

[...] doppelgängers,<sup>541</sup> and more. In 'The Lady of the House of Love' (1979), Dracula's descendant whilst residing in an archetypal desolate castle is the victim of a patriarchal curse. In 'The Werewolf' (1979) the reader encounters a wolf "huge [...] with red eyes and running, grizzled chops"<sup>542</sup> masquerading as family, in 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974) the "cunningly stimulated"<sup>543</sup> fetish doll in the bedchamber, and in *Nights at the Circus* (1984) the "fevered construction of a brain determined to control women's minds and bodies, freed into a woman with her own wings and freedom."<sup>544</sup> In the "socially, politically, and sexually subversive"<sup>545</sup> worlds she creates, the mythic merges with the everyday and uncanny supernatural figures are commonplace.

Carter's Gothic writing, as Gina Wisker pinpoints is "self-critical [...] tending towards carnivalesque excess," it "does not merely explode and critique but offers rich imagery and potential."<sup>546</sup> The Gothic imagery, tropes, and settings that fill her work reinterpret established traditions, and challenge recognised definitions of the Gothic, horror, and the supernatural. Furthermore, her fiction rejects what is commonly understood as horror for "her writing interweaves the fairytale and the everyday real, the domestic and the bizarre, using the oxymoron figures of twinning self and Other/self to refuse the polarisation which lies at the heart of conventional horror."<sup>547</sup> Much of Carter's fictional oeuvre ostensibly adheres to Frederic Jameson's critical characterisation of Gothic narratives where "a sheltered woman of some kind is terrorized and victimized by an "evil" male."<sup>548</sup> Yet through her writing Carter subverts this through her positioning of the domestic sphere as a space of legitimatised male violence. These

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<sup>541</sup> Gina Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings and Vampire Kisses* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 48.

<sup>542</sup> Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2006), 127.

<sup>543</sup> Angela Carter, *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (London: Virago Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>544</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction*, 61.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>548</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 288.

narratives then are intentional, feminist “denunciation[s] of patriarchy,”<sup>549</sup> the very likes of which Jameson cautioned against.

Carter’s fiction can be categorised as both feminist and Gothic, this combination causing it to sometimes sit “uneasily in relation to both dominant Gothic conventions and feminist discourse, especially as they converge through the ‘female Gothic’.”<sup>550</sup> First coined by Ellen Moers in 1976, the term ‘female Gothic’<sup>551</sup> refers to “the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic.”<sup>552</sup> Paulina Palmer identifies a friction in Carter’s fiction between the “‘demythologising’ impulse of her early fictions, exemplified by *The Magic Toyshop*, and the more ‘celebratory’ and ‘utopian’ tone of her fictions from the late 1970s onwards.”<sup>553</sup> Instances of “masochistic, mutilated and victimised femininity derived from the male Gothic imaginary”<sup>554</sup> may pepper her early work, but much of her work, including the narratives analysed within this chapter, present female protagonists as sexual agents with the potential to dominate others, assert their own desires, and secure their own freedom. Carter’s puppet women are much more than one dimensional copies of meek femininity.

Expectedly, given its author’s outspoken feminist stance, Carter’s writing engages explicitly with debates surrounding pornography, sexual violence, erotica, and woman as fetishized spectacle. As Rebecca Munford notes, Carter’s “Gothic heroines have frequently been censured

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Rebecca Munford, *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers: Angela Carter and European Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 22-23.

<sup>551</sup> This term is a contentious one, “since the early 1990s [...] there has been considerable debate over the usefulness of the ‘Female Gothic’ as a separate literary category or genre.” – Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, “Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic”, in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, eds. Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1. Some prefer alternative terminology, E. J. Clery for instance elected to call her book on the topic *Women’s Gothic* (2000). Wallace and Smith suggest that retaining the term “as a broad and fluid category – while both interrogating it and acknowledging its many manifestations (feminist Gothic, lesbian Gothic, comic Gothic, postfeminist Gothic) –” would be best the approach. – Ibid, 11.

<sup>552</sup> Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: The Women’s Press, 1978), 90.

<sup>553</sup> Paulina Palmer, “From “Coded Mannequin” to Bird Woman: Angela Carter’s Magic Flight”, in *Women Reading Women’s Writing*, ed. Sue Roe (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), 179-80.

<sup>554</sup> Rebecca Munford, “‘The Desecration of the Temple’; or, ‘Sexuality as Terrorism’? Angela Carter’s (Post-)feminist Gothic Heroines,” *Gothic Studies*, 9:2 (November 2007): 61.

as little more than objects of sadistic male desires by feminist critics,” due to her engagement with “the sexual and textual violence of specifically ‘male Gothic’ scripts – in particular the Gothic scenarios of the Marquis de Sade, Edgar Allan Poe, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Charles Baudelaire and Bram Stoker.”<sup>555</sup> Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman* (1978) is an articulate defence of de Sade as “moral pornographer.”<sup>556</sup> In it Carter argues that de Sade claimed the “right of free sexuality for women,” installing them “as beings of power in his imaginary worlds.”<sup>557</sup> Carter’s choice to centralise de Sade’s pornography in *The Sadeian Woman*, as Hera Cook surmises, “was a means of both openly conveying the emotional violence done to women and a forceful rejection of modes of expression shaped by internalised female sexual repression.”<sup>558</sup> Regarding Edgar Allan Poe specifically, Carter remarked that the Gothic tradition in which he writes:

Grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism. Characters and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions. Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural – and thus operates against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact. Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function – that of provoking unease.<sup>559</sup>

In her Gothic fiction Carter deftly reworks the motifs and cultural myths established by her literary forebears, writers like Poe and Hoffman, of who she had “always been fond.”<sup>560</sup> Writers whose influence runs through her work and that crafted remarkable “Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid.

<sup>556</sup> Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 2000), 19.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>558</sup> Hera Cook, “Angela Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman* and Female Desire in England 1960-1975,” *Women’s History Review*, 23:6 (November 2014): 950.

<sup>559</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1974), 122.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid, 121.



– mirrors; the externalized self, forsaken castles; haunted forests; forbidden sexual objects.”<sup>561</sup> It is the last of these with which this chapter is concerned.

Right through her work, from *Shadow Dance* (1966), to *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), to *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffmann* (1972), to *Fireworks* (1974) as Marion May Campbell observes, Carter “addresses the problems of animated dolls, of puppetry and ventriloquy and entrapment in the specular and the spectacle, where the politics of gender are concerned.”<sup>562</sup> The ‘living’ doll is a recurrent motif in Carter’s Gothic writing, and sits uncannily alongside her frequent use of other such Gothic motifs: the monstrous feminine, the haunted house, and the doppelgänger in all its variations. Carter’s fascination with these simulacra, with the idea of “invented people, of imitation human beings”<sup>563</sup> is highlighted in an interview she did with Kim Evans shortly before her death. In it, Carter stresses that “the big question that we have to ask ourselves is how do we know we’re not imitation human beings?”<sup>564</sup> The most prominent example of this ‘living’ doll motif is found in ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ where the titular vampiric marionette, in the hands of her accomplished puppet master, awakens to a human-like state. The motif is also present in her earliest works. The ‘living’ doll figure is central to *The Magic Toyshop*, a macabre fairy-tale revision which perfectly intertwines issues of class, gender, incest, tyranny, and sexuality. Pi-tai Peng discerns that within Carter’s fiction the doll represents “the ‘unnatural’ Gothic body which is haunted by the return of the repressed ‘body in fragments’, by the otherness, thingness of the sexed body, and by the ‘stringed’ mechanism of her fierce desire.”<sup>565</sup> These uncanny figures function in Carter’s fiction as fetishized objects, their abject female bodies seemingly subject to the whims and violence of male desire.

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>562</sup> Marion May Campbell, “Re-Materialising the Disappearing Body in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*,” *Postmodern Studies*, 50 (2014): 149.

<sup>563</sup> Charlotte Crofts, *Anagrams of Desire: Angela Carter’s Writing for Radio, Film and Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> Pi-tai Peng, “Angela Carter’s Postmodern Feminism,” 106-107.

## Performance and Patriarchy: Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*

*The Magic Toyshop* is the story of Melanie and her two younger siblings as they are uprooted from a life of rural comfort to one of urban poverty when they are sent to live with their toymaker Uncle, Philip, his wife Margaret, and her two brothers Finn and Francie, in his ominous toyshop. In this wonderfully sinister puppet-world where “nothing was ordinary, nothing was expected,”<sup>566</sup> the boundaries of performance and reality, effect and affect, blur. Carter employs magical realism within the novel to transform the orphaned Melanie’s tale into something altogether more disturbing, part twisted bildungsroman, part Gothic fairy tale.

In *The Magic Toyshop* the female characters are impersonators of normative femininity that characterise masculine desires. In his workshop Philip constructs compliant creations, lifeless marionettes which he manipulates into movement. In the domestic space the women are likewise forced to submit to his carefully constructed model of femininity. Early in the narrative Melanie is informed of Philip’s demands, including a prohibition on trousers for women which Finn describes as being “one of your Uncle Philip’s ways.”<sup>567</sup> He cautions that Philip “can’t abide a woman in trousers. He won’t have a woman in the shop if she’s got trousers on her and he sees her. He shouts her out into the street for a harlot.”<sup>568</sup> Those who wear them are “a walking affront to him.”<sup>569</sup> Additionally, she is advised to wear “no make-up [...] And only speak when you’re spoken to. He likes, you know, silent women.”<sup>570</sup> As Palmer notes, Carter characterises “woman as a puppet, performing scripts assigned to her by a male-supremacist culture.”<sup>571</sup> Carter depicts the bond between puppet master and puppet as representative of that between man and woman

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<sup>566</sup> Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago Press, 1992), 60.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>571</sup> Paulina Palmer, “Gender as Performance in the Fiction of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood”, in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, eds. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 31.

within a patriarchal culture. Furthermore, women in Carter's fiction consistently "appear in transmogrified forms, as puppets, dolls and phantoms."<sup>572</sup>

These prohibitions require the women under Philip's control to perform to a certain type of femininity model; as Donna Mitchell observes this "requires a removal of certain natural elements that effectively dehumanize [...] [them] to the status of an idol or the inanimate object of the doll that is admired only for her youthful beauty and silence."<sup>573</sup> Within the walls of the toyshop, in this stifling space where "everything was flattened to paper cut-outs by the personified gravity of Uncle Philip,"<sup>574</sup> Melanie and Margaret exist as doll-like figures who seemingly "cast no shadow."<sup>575</sup> As such, they conform to the model of deathly femininity that exists in much of Carter's work, where subjugated female characters ostensibly exist in an otherworldly limbo, where they are in a "half-sleeping state, neither fully dead nor fully alive."<sup>576</sup> Consequently, they become inherently tied to the artificial figures with "severed limbs and watching masks"<sup>577</sup> that line Philip's workshop.

Rendered mute on the day of her wedding Aunt Margaret is the prototypical silent female: "not a word can she speak [...] It is a terrible affliction [...] like a curse. Her silence."<sup>578</sup> She personifies the archetypal Gothic heroine who is "locked away and physically silent"<sup>579</sup> and trapped in a "helpless, dependent, childlike position."<sup>580</sup> She is economically dependent on Philip, with no money of her own, nor means to earn it. This is yet another example of the rules to which she

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<sup>572</sup> Munford, *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers*, 47.

<sup>573</sup> Donna Mitchell, "Leda or Living Doll? Women as Dolls in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*," *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, 5:2 (2016): 5.

<sup>574</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 169.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

<sup>576</sup> Angela Carter, *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 488.

<sup>577</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 171.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>579</sup> Clare Broome Saunders, "Incarcerating the Sane: The Asylum and Female Powerlessness in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fiction", in *Women and Gothic*, ed. Maria Purves (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 155.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

must adhere, “it is his way. He doesn’t trust me with money.”<sup>581</sup> Within *The Magic Toyshop* Margaret functions as an ideal of domesticated passive femininity. She is to Philip little more than a doll, mirroring the artificial beings he constructs, moulded to his will as she readily obeys his restrictions.

Melanie too initially views her aunt in these terms; she perceives Margaret to be merely “a shadow [...] a wispy appendage of the toymaking uncle.”<sup>582</sup> Melanie feels that her surrogate mother is as “frail as a pressed flower,”<sup>583</sup> and questions her substance, “what is Aunt Margaret made of? Bird bones and tissue paper, spun glass and straw.”<sup>584</sup> Furthermore her affection for the children is framed in doll-like terms, “she kissed Melanie goodnight on the cheek, taking her in a stiff, Dutch-doll embrace; her arms were two hinged sticks, her mouth cool, dry and papery, her kiss inhibited, tight-lipped but somehow desperate, making an anguished plea for affection.”<sup>585</sup> Margaret as both a submissive and maternal figure represents an idealised form of femininity “within the theatre box of the domestic sphere.”<sup>586</sup> Indeed, as Andrew Hock Soon Ng contends, the domestic sphere in Carter’s fiction functions as an “abode in which to live and a theater box through which to perform.”<sup>587</sup> This performance directed by the same patriarchal force that controls the home.

In the tradition of the Gothic heroines that preceded her, Melanie recognises displaced versions of herself in other characters. She sees herself in the monstrous puppets that line the toyshop’s walls, and primarily, she sees herself in Margaret. Melanie increasingly adopts the doll-like terms, previously reserved for her aunt, to describe herself, “she was a wind-up putting-away doll, clicking through its programmed movements. Uncle Philip might have made her over,

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<sup>581</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 140.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid, 48-49.

<sup>586</sup> Mitchell, “Leda or Living Doll,” 7.

<sup>587</sup> Andrew Hock Soon Ng, *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 35.

already. She was without volition of her own.”<sup>588</sup> Viewing herself in such terms seemingly ties Melanie’s fate to her aunt’s. The two are reduced to automata under Philip’s absolute authority, where “the violence in the house was palpable. It trembled on the cold stairs and rose up in invisible clouds from the thread-bare carpets.”<sup>589</sup> Margaret then serves as Melanie’s silent alter ego and is illustrative of the submissive fate that would await Melanie were she to surrender her autonomy entirely. As Hock Soon Ng observes, Philip demands his female subjects’ compliance with his every “hegemonic, masculine whim [...] so much so that their expressions must accord to his desires and determination, or be unpermitted.”<sup>590</sup> As his puppets are defined by their flawless skilful construction, “he is a master [...] there is no one like him, for art or craft. He’s a genius in his own way and he knows it,”<sup>591</sup> the women under his rule must conform to “the unattainable version of female identity that is presented to women on a daily basis through various mediums that reduce them to the sum of their body parts.”<sup>592</sup> With their autonomy stripped both are but “poor women pensioners, planets round a male sun.”<sup>593</sup>

In Philip Carter portrays a grotesquely exaggerated form of patriarchy, whose “authority was stifling,”<sup>594</sup> and possesses the chilling potential to “crush you to nothing.”<sup>595</sup> He denies his extended family autonomy, and this patriarchal power transforms the mortal members of his household into mere puppets. As Sarah Gamble asserts, “while his artificial marionettes are life-size, his family are reduced to the status of playthings, tied to his whims by strings of fear, obligation and economic dependence.”<sup>596</sup> An archetypal Gothic tyrant, Philip is depicted in rightly monstrous terms as “the Beast of the Apocalypse [...] [a] monster with a voice so loud [...] [it

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<sup>588</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toysshop*, 76.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>590</sup> Hock Soon Ng, *Women and Domestic Space*, 26.

<sup>591</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toysshop*, 64.

<sup>592</sup> Mitchell, “Leda or Living Doll,” 4.

<sup>593</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toysshop*, 140.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>596</sup> Sarah Gamble, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 71.

could] bring the roof down and bury them all?”<sup>597</sup> He “never talked to his wife except to bark brusque commands. He gave her a necklace that choked her. He beat her younger brother. He chilled the air through which he moved. His towering, blank-eyed presence at the head of the table drew the savour from the good food she cooked. He suppressed the idea of laughter.”<sup>598</sup> The necklace he gifts Margaret is more akin to a torture device than a jewel to be treasured, it is “heavy, crippling [...] [made of] two hinged silver pieces knobbed with moonstones which snapped into place around her lean neck and rose up almost to her chin so that she could hardly move her head.”<sup>599</sup> At his request she wears the piece for their ritualistic weekly Sunday dinner and it prohibits her bodily autonomy to such an extent that “she ate only with the utmost difficulty.”<sup>600</sup> This item restricts further her already limited independence, reinforces Philip’s patriarchal position, and underscores “albeit in an exaggerated fashion, the suffocating and restrictive burden of femininity that women must possess,”<sup>601</sup> and indeed, embody, through their gender performativity.

Philip’s workshop overflows with “partially assembled puppets, hanged and dismembered, on the walls,”<sup>602</sup> whose disjointed bodies are excessive in their artificiality. These creations adhere to Wolfgang Kayser’s definition of the grotesque as “the distortion of all ingredients, the fusion of different realms, the co-existence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly and repulsive.”<sup>603</sup> Melanie is frightened of their “carved and severed limbs,”<sup>604</sup> of the “partially assembled puppets of all sizes, some almost as tall as Melanie herself; blind-eyed puppets, some armless, some legless, some naked, some clothed, all with a strange liveliness as they dangled unfinished from their hooks.”<sup>605</sup> Brimming with these grotesque creations, Philip’s toyshop is a characteristically Gothic space, a

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<sup>597</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 77.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>601</sup> Mitchell, “Leda or Living Doll,” 8.

<sup>602</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 126.

<sup>603</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 79.

<sup>604</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 66.

<sup>605</sup> Ibid, 67.

“Bluebeard’s castle [...] [with] long, brown passages [...] [and] secret doors, shut tight.”<sup>606</sup> Its inhabitants are haunted by the prospect that “something, some clockwork horror rolling hugely on small wheels, some terrifying joke, or hideous novelty”<sup>607</sup> could emerge at any point to frighten them. One such disturbing piece is a cuckoo clock crafted from a taxidermy bird, “with the sounding mechanism trapped, somehow, in its feathered breast.”<sup>608</sup> Melanie observes “a grotesque inventiveness, a deliberate eccentricity in the idea of the cuckoo clock”<sup>609</sup> that she had never before encountered.

Philip is renowned for these “bestial, ferocious”<sup>610</sup> creations, and Melanie’s first interaction with one of these sets the tone for what follows. As a young child she received a gift from her distant uncle, and when she opened “the jack-in-the-box, a grotesque caricature of her own face leered from the head that leapt out at her.”<sup>611</sup> This creature fuels her nightmares. The uncanny nature of these created beings is readily apparent, they are frightening in their replication of humanity and sinister in their lifelessness. The terror that these inhuman figures provoke though, as Mitchell suggests, is principally due to the fact that they serve as a constant reminder to Melanie of her “potential fate of being ‘thingified’ by Uncle Philip in order to become yet another fragmented prop in his puppet theatre.”<sup>612</sup> Melanie is uncomfortably aware of Philip’s puppets to such an extent that she is haunted by their omnipresence.

Philip utilises these monstrous puppets in his inhouse theatre. At the hands of Finn “an inexperienced and inexpert puppeteer,”<sup>613</sup> the first “GRAND PERFORMANCE - FLOWER’S

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>612</sup> Mitchell, “Leda or Living Doll,” 8.

<sup>613</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 128.

PUPPET MICROCOSM”<sup>614</sup> becomes a brutal spectacle. Philip’s treasured puppets thrash “violently against each other as if overcome with concupiscence”<sup>615</sup> tearing limb from limb, wrenched apart at the “controls; in a spiky halo of torn wire.”<sup>616</sup> Philip’s violent outbreak at this destruction results in Finn’s injured body resembling a broken doll, “and still he never moved. His eyes were open and staring. He looked broken like the toy he threw against the wall. All his lovely movement was shattered.”<sup>617</sup> Philip tosses aside the wounded Finn with “the casual brutality of Nazi soldiers moving corpses in films of concentration camps.”<sup>618</sup> Unable to utilise Finn’s puppeteering any longer, Philip concludes that the next performance will combine human and non-human performers, “that’s it. That’ll be a novelty. Puppets and people. I’ll use the girl.”<sup>619</sup> Philip’s resolve to “use the girl” reinforces Melanie’s subordinate position as object. Furthermore, it aligns with Laurence A. Rickels’ theory that within the Gothic family “everybody is made infinitely available to everybody else.”<sup>620</sup>

Significantly, amongst this mass of eerie creations, Melanie uncovers a particular “fallen doll in white satin and tulle” that bears an eerie resemblance to herself, a fetish of sorts: “lying face-downwards in a tangle of strings was a puppet fully five feet high, a *sylphide* in a fountain of white tulle, fallen flat down as if someone had got tired of her in the middle of playing with her, dropped her and wandered off. She had long, black hair down to the waist of her tight satin bodice.”<sup>621</sup> In David Wheatley’s 1986 film adaptation of Carter’s novel the uncanniness of this encounter is evident. Melanie who is clearly troubled by this doppelgänger, is chastised by Finn as he asserts that the puppet is nothing to be frightened of for “it’s only his dream.”<sup>622</sup> This image

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<sup>614</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>617</sup> Ibid, 132-133.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>620</sup> Laurence A. Rickels, *The Vampire Lectures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 343.

<sup>621</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 67.

<sup>622</sup> *The Magic Toyshop*, directed by David Wheatley, performances by Caroline Milmo, Tom Bell, Kiliana McKenna, and Patricia Kerrigan (1987; London: Granada Television), VHS.



echoes Melanie's previous performances in front of the mirror in her childhood bedroom where, swathed in fabric, "she gift-wrapped herself for a phantom bridegroom."<sup>623</sup> This discovery of her doll doppelgänger foreshadows the fate that awaits Melanie.

Manipulated by Philip in a revised performance of Leda and the Swan, Melanie is forced to perform his ritualised, perfectly prescribed image of passive femininity. In "this crazy world," where men and women were "dwarfed by toys and puppets, where even the birds were mechanical and the few human figures went masked," Melanie struggles to distinguish performer from performance, determining that "she was in the night again, and the doll was herself."<sup>624</sup> Here the conditions of reality and performance are distorted as 'doll' Melanie merges with 'real' Melanie, the result is a 'girl-doll' whose body, as Munford proclaims, is "(re)written as a site of violent confusion [...] [sentenced] to a series of sinister and violent assaults by the male artist."<sup>625</sup> Through a highly sexualised performance in the "GRAND XMAS NOVELTY SHOW – art and nature combine with Philip Flower to bring you a Unique Phenomenon,"<sup>626</sup> Philip transforms Melanie into a fetishized object, a desired spectacle.

This performance is a staged production of 'Leda and the Swan,' of "the mythological scene where Jove/Zeus rapes a mortal woman called Leda in the form of a swan."<sup>627</sup> The novel reaches its climax as Philip "resenting her because she was not a puppet"<sup>628</sup> positions Melanie as victim, his swan puppet enacting the rape of Leda, Melanie's current guise. Melanie "must keep her place as Leda to Uncle Philip's Swan in the mythology of awakening in which women blossom into shuddering subordination"<sup>629</sup> for as Sue Roe notes, Carter's heroine's consciously "sign

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<sup>623</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 2.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>625</sup> Munford, *Decadent Daughters and Monstrous Mothers*, 126.

<sup>626</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 163.

<sup>627</sup> Mitchell, "Leda or Living Doll," 10.

<sup>628</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 144.

<sup>629</sup> Sue Roe, "The Disorder of Love: Angela Carter's Surrealist Collage", in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 1994), 69.

themselves up for display.”<sup>630</sup> Thus Melanie “must submit to her dictated role within Uncle Philip’s theatre box.”<sup>631</sup> Philip expresses his discontent that Melanie’s developed adolescent physique is not the figure of his imaginings: “I wanted my Leda to be a little girl.”<sup>632</sup> He grumbles that she is too “well built, for fifteen [...] Your tits are too big.”<sup>633</sup> Melanie’s developed body is incompatible with the child-like character that Philip had envisioned and thus unacceptable.

During this performance Melanie seemingly succumbs to Philip’s desire to reduce her to the status of object. As Wisker observes Melanie “is costumed, manipulated and partnered with a grotesque phallic polystyrene and wooden swan, the mythic, puppet product of Philip’s (and to some extent Melanie’s) wild sexual imaginings.”<sup>634</sup> The swan:

Was almost as tall as she, an egg-shaped sphere of plywood painted white and coated with glued-on feathers [...] its long neck was made of rubber [...] it bent and swayed with an unnerving life of its own. Its head and beak [...] were carved of wood, with black glass eyes inset. The beak was painted with gold paint. The wings were constructed on the principle of the wings of model aeroplanes, but curved; arched struts of thin wood with an overall covering of feathered white paper. Its black legs were tucked up beneath it. It was a grotesque parody of a swan; Edward Lear might have designed it.<sup>635</sup>

Ahead of the performance Melanie is haunted by the threat of Uncle Philip’s wrath, by the fear that “if she did not act her part well, a trapdoor in the swan’s side might open and an armed host of pigmy Uncle Philips, all clockwork, might rush out and savage her.”<sup>636</sup> This nightmarish image

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid.

<sup>631</sup> Mitchell, “Leda or Living Doll,” 9.

<sup>632</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 143.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 46.

<sup>635</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 165.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid, 166.

“seemed real and awful. All her laughter was snuffed out.”<sup>637</sup> Regardless of the performative nature of this rape, and her laughter when first seeing the “dumpy and homely and eccentric”<sup>638</sup> swan, Melanie is genuinely frightened. She finds herself “wrenched from her own personality,” unable to distinguish fiction from reality, “in this staged fantasy, anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers.”<sup>639</sup> Melanie as female, is rendered passive, her sexual identity rebuffed, she is distorted into the doll of Uncle Philip’s imaginings.

Melanie reduced to object, to puppet, cannot tell actuality from imaginary, unable to correlate “this girl”<sup>640</sup> with herself. She is rendered immobile, consumed by fear, and unable to fight off “the obscene swan [...] [that] had mounted her.”<sup>641</sup> Trapped under the overpowering weight of this threat Melanie:

Thrust with all her force to get rid of it but the wings came down all around her like a tent and its head fell forward and nestled in her neck. The gilded beak dug deeply into the soft flesh. She screamed, hardly realising she was screaming. She was covered completely by the swan but for her kicking feet and her screaming face. [...] She screamed again. There were feathers in her mouth.<sup>642</sup>

Wisker contends that in this pivotal scene “farce and horror are played out in equal measure,” it is “rape by proxy. The farce undercuts the terror but the description of the swan’s mechanical movements emphasises Philip’s power, both physical and economic, which is somehow licensed

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<sup>637</sup> Ibid.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid, 167.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

by Jove himself, as another rapist.”<sup>643</sup> This brutal act of masculine fantasy evidently highlights the revocation or denial of the prospect of feminine desire.

Melanie’s anxious performance of Leda is defined by clunky movements and icy gestures that, as Mitchell observes, “mimic her earlier rehearsals in front of the mirror and emphasize her proximity to a doll-like existence.”<sup>644</sup> Framed through the male gaze her role is overseen, regulated, and finally denounced by Philip as he criticises her for overacting, “you were melodramatic. Puppets don’t overact. You spoiled the poetry.”<sup>645</sup> Philip’s desire for Melanie to suppress her emotions here further accentuates his efforts to reduce her to the position of a doll-like being. Following this disturbing ordeal, adolescent Melanie appears to acknowledge the trauma at the centre of the show’s narrative, admitting “I don’t think [...] that I want to be Leda.”<sup>646</sup> Melanie performs her roles at Philip’s instigation; in a conventionally feminine guise she is alternately nymph, bride, and innocent child, her final role is the reverse of these romantic personae as she becomes symbolically a victim of rape.

Prior to this performance Melanie rehearses with Finn in a scene which perfectly encapsulates her lack of bodily autonomy as it stresses her position as a mere thing to be traded at will between the men of the house. This rehearsal rape is instigated at Philip’s command, however Finn’s complete ignorance at the prospect of “Melanie’s desire to actively participate in this act demotes her to the status of a sex-doll, thus humiliating her further.”<sup>647</sup> Melanie is informed by Finn of the requirement for a rehearsal in order to “get the movements right.”<sup>648</sup> This moment

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<sup>643</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 47.

<sup>644</sup> Mitchell, “Leda or Living Doll,” 10.

<sup>645</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 167.

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>647</sup> Mitchell, “Leda or Living Doll,” 10.

<sup>648</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 145.

prompts Finn to confront the extent to which Philip exerts total control over every aspect of their lives:

He wanted me to fuck you [...] It was his fault [...] Suddenly I saw it all [...] He's pulled our strings as if we were his puppets, and there I was, all ready to touch you up just as he wanted. He told me to rehearse Leda and the swan with you. Somewhere private. Like in your room, he said. Go up and rehearse a rape with Melanie in your bedroom. Christ. He wanted me to do you and he set the scene. Ah, he's evil!<sup>649</sup>

This revelation, alongside Finn's admittance that for Philip, Melanie's innocence makes her "something to change and destroy,"<sup>650</sup> is the spark for Finn's subsequent destruction of Philip's prized puppets.

Philip's abuse of Melanie prompts Finn to tear apart the swan; he "dismembered it down in the work-room [...] chopped it into small pieces."<sup>651</sup> He discloses that "I did it partly for your sake," because "it covered you [...] It rode you."<sup>652</sup> Yet, it is the swan's position as an extension of Philip that ultimately proves most horrifying, "he put himself into it. That is why it had to go."<sup>653</sup> As the toyshop is left smouldering, "all burning, everything burning, toys and puppets and masks [...] bursting open with fire,"<sup>654</sup> Melanie and Margaret are released from their doll-like entrapment.<sup>655</sup> Symbolically, at the novel's ending when Philip's patriarchy is overthrown, Margaret's voice returns, "struck dumb on her wedding day, she found her old voice again the day

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<sup>649</sup> Ibid, 151-152.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>651</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>655</sup> This is taken a step further in the closing scene of David Wheatley's 1989 film adaptation as Finn and Francie burn a guy of Philip in celebration of his death, thus reemphasising the centrality of the doll figure to the narrative.

she was freed.”<sup>656</sup> For the first time Margaret “seemed to be examining the possibility of her own tomorrow, where she could come and go as she pleased and wear what clothes she wanted and maybe even part her locked lips and speak. Or sing,” for “catastrophe had freed her tongue.”<sup>657</sup> Melanie and Margaret now freed from their defined position within the family as “fetishized object, as spectacle,”<sup>658</sup> and from their established roles in “part of a performance in which [...] [they are] reduced to the status of a wooden marionette,”<sup>659</sup> have finally reclaimed their independence. Unrepressed by the shadow of Philip’s tyranny, they can henceforth employ an agency that was previously denied to them as fetishized beings. Unlike the placid creations which Philip assembled in his toyshop, lifeless creations that he held in higher esteem than their living counterparts, these women have now finally become real people “made of flesh and blood.”<sup>660</sup>

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<sup>656</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 197.

<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

<sup>658</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Cinema Magic and the Old Monsters: Angela Carter’s Cinema”, in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 1994), 235-236.

<sup>659</sup> Ibid.

<sup>660</sup> Carter, *The Magic Toyshop*, 1.

### Eroticised Performance: Angela Carter's 'The Loves of Lady Purple'

'The Loves of Lady Purple', a short story from Carter's 1974 collection *Fireworks*, draws upon her experience of living in Japan from 1969 to 1971. Illustrative of Carter's move to a more overt postmodernist form of fiction during this period, *Fireworks* consists of narratives which rework notions of truth and interpretation. Disrupting the reader's perceptions, these tales merge fact and fiction, blurring boundaries between the two. Gamble terms 'The Loves of Lady Purple' a "Gothic fable of a life-size marionette who under the godlike manipulations of her puppet-master nightly re-enacts the monstrous career of Lady Purple, a courtesan who took to murdering her lovers before eventually becoming consumed by her own sexual veracity"<sup>661</sup> and turned into a marionette, transgressing from a human form to a lifeless state. Lady Purple, previously a woman of flesh and blood now an artisanal doppelgänger, performs as part of "a universal cast of two-headed dogs, dwarfs, alligator men, bearded ladies and giants in leopard-skin loin cloths [...] [who] reveal their singularities in the sideshows and, wherever they come from, they share the sullen glamour of deformity, an internationality which acknowledges no geographic boundaries."<sup>662</sup> In this madcap theatrical world "the grotesque is the order of the day."<sup>663</sup>

'The Loves of Lady Purple' is, in the tradition of the Pygmalion myth, a tale of an inanimate female figure being brought to life. Amongst the mass of literary narratives of artificial life, as George L. Hersey comments, undoubtedly "the most famous of all statue lovers is Pygmalion,"<sup>664</sup> and Ovid's "version of the Pygmalion story has been definitive ever since it was written."<sup>665</sup> It tells of a Cypriot sculptor, Pygmalion, who "skilfully carved a snowy ivory statue" of his ideal woman,

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<sup>661</sup> Gamble, *Angela Carter*, 104.

<sup>662</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 25.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>664</sup> George L. Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>665</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

one free from “the many faults which nature had implanted in the female sex.”<sup>666</sup> Pygmalion asks the gods for a bride and Venus, answering his prayer, animates the previously inanimate sculpture, it surrenders to his touch, “just as wax of Hymettus melts in the sun and, worked by men’s fingers, is fashioned into many different shapes, and made fit for use by being loved.”<sup>667</sup> After being brought to life the effigy marries her creator and conceives a son, “consummation follows animation [...] [yet] Pygmalion’s love for the statue is kindled even in its inanimate state.”<sup>668</sup> He embraced it, yearning “that it kissed him back,” probed its form to determine its lifelikeness “and thought he felt his fingers sink into the limbs he touched,” courted it with favours “the kind of presents that girls enjoy,” addressed “it in flattering speeches”<sup>669</sup> and even “called it his bedfellow.”<sup>670</sup> Thus, as Jane Munro asserts, “fetishistically, Pygmalion’s sexual feelings are aroused not just by the vivified woman, but by her pre-transformed existence as artefact”<sup>671</sup> and significantly, by his imagination.

In ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ the Professor has not created life in a strictly Ovidian sense, rather he awakens the doll, who was once “the masterpiece of a long-dead, anonymous artisan.”<sup>672</sup> Furthermore, as Stefanie Eck discerns, “unlike Pygmalion, the Asiatic Professor does not feel threatened or appalled by Lady Purple’s allegedly ‘unappeasable’ sexual appetite and promiscuity. On the contrary, her actions are products of his and of his (male) audience’s imagination.”<sup>673</sup> As Wisker notes, “Carter’s Lady Purple is an even more animated version of male dreams and nightmares than the Asiatic Professor had imagined. His creation comes to life a [...] *My Fair Lady*

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<sup>666</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 231.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>668</sup> Munro, *Silent Partners*, 139.

<sup>669</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, 231.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>671</sup> Munro, *Silent Partners*, 139.

<sup>672</sup> Carter, *Fireworks (1993)*, 26-27.

<sup>673</sup> Stefanie Eck, *Galatea’s Emancipation: The Transformation of the Pygmalion Myth in Anglo-Saxon Literature Since the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014), 21.



(1964) with a vengeance.”<sup>674</sup> “The Loves of Lady Purple’ deftly confronts the patriarchal dread of uninhibited feminine sexuality through the motif of the fetishized ‘living’ doll.

A multitude of typical motifs of the Gothic genre combine in the figure of Lady Purple, the “Queen of Night,”<sup>675</sup> for she is concurrently unearthly vampire, flesh-eating zombie, and monstrous marionette:

There were glass rubies in her head for eyes and her ferocious teeth, carved out of mother o’ pearl, were always on show for she had a permanent smile. Her face was as white as chalk because it was covered with the skin of supplest white leather [...] Her beautiful hands seemed more like weapons because her nails were so long, five inches of pointed enamelled scarlet, and she wore a wig of black hair arranged in a chignon more heavily elaborate than any human neck could have endured. This monumental *chevelure* was stuck through with many brilliant pins tipped with pieces of broken mirror so that, every time she moved, she cast a multitude of scintillating reflections which danced about the theatre like mice of light. Her clothes were all of deep, dark, slumbrous colours – profound pinks, crimson and the vibrating purple with which she was synonymous, a purple the colour of blood in a love suicide.<sup>676</sup>

Lady Purple appears, in part, to conform to a romanticised model of femininity. She has porcelain skin, perfectly coiffed hair, is robed in lavish fabrics, and wears “a permanent smile”<sup>677</sup> upon her painted face, yet something is awry. This beauty is tinged with a deathly, almost demonic edge, her teeth are “ferocious,” her hands lethal “like weapons,” her skin ghostly “white as chalk.”<sup>678</sup> The

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<sup>674</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 45.

<sup>675</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 26.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*

embellishments she wears, “more heavily elaborate than any human neck could have endured”<sup>679</sup> only serving to accentuate her inherent otherness, a visible marker of her status as object. An intrinsic uncanniness that is only amplified through the “multitude of scintillating reflections” she casts.

This amalgamation of the vampiric, the inhuman, and the artificial is employed in another of Carter’s short stories, ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ (1979), to likewise explore “female sexual subjectivity under patriarchy.”<sup>680</sup> Here, the lady in her haunted state is reminiscent of “a ventriloquist’s doll,” a “a great, ingenious piece of clockwork,” yet one whose machinery is “inexorably running down and would leave her lifeless”<sup>681</sup> despite her insatiable desires. Eliza Claudia Filimon contends that in Gothic fiction, the female vampire largely signifies either “a heavily invested site of cultural fears about female sexuality” or concerns of “the threat of the New Woman”<sup>682</sup> as expressed in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The transformation of Lady Purple into a marionette seemingly suppresses her sexual potential and erotic desires. Susanne Grass argues that Lady Purple, as “personified vagina dentata,” embodies “male anxieties about overpowering female sexuality as unruly and dangerous.”<sup>683</sup> ‘Vagina dentata’ refers to the peculiar notion that the vagina is “furnished with teeth, and thus a source of danger in being able to bite and castrate.”<sup>684</sup> Positioning Lady Purple as such outwardly amplifies her monstrosity, yet it also affords her a certain power, that the male gaze’s reduction of her to the status of mere object fervently denies.

The figure of the vampire occupies a particularly significant position within the Gothic. Wisker deems them “the ultimate Gothic creatures” for they are:

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<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Pi-tai Peng, “Angela Carter’s Postmodern Feminism,” 108.

<sup>681</sup> Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 118.

<sup>682</sup> Eliza Claudia Filimon, *Heterotopia in Angela Carter’s Fiction: Worlds in Collision* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014), 124.

<sup>683</sup> Susanne Grass, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 206.

<sup>684</sup> Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (London: Imigo, 1949), 218.

A living dead contradiction able to vehicle the angst, desires and fears of whatever time, place and cultural context produces them. Sexier, better dressed and more able to pass as romantic leads than zombies, their use as a measure of the gendered cultural concerns and contradictions of time and place is so varied as to enable a simultaneous fascination and repulsion. They project what we desire and what disgusts us.<sup>685</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising then that Carter employs the vampire figure as a metaphor, utilising them as a vehicle “for the contradictions of our gendered worlds and experiences.”<sup>686</sup> The postmodern vampire, or monster, is no longer the hideous ‘other’, it has evolved. As J Halberstam pointedly states in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, monsters make:

The peripheral and the marginal part of the center. Monsters within postmodernism are already inside [...] and they work their way out. Accordingly, it is the human, the façade of the normal, that tends to become the place of terror within postmodern Gothic. Postmodernity makes monstrosity a function of consent and a result of habit... we wear modern monsters like skin, they are us, they are on us and in us.<sup>687</sup>

Halberstam’s reflection pertains to Carter’s fiction for her monsters, as Pi-tai Peng argues, “do not just reside in the figures of the madwoman or vampiric woman but in the female subject’s problematic relation to her body which is constructed as the body of the other, or in Gothic terms, the corpse, the doll’s body.”<sup>688</sup> Thus monstrosity in Carter’s fiction has a decidedly human, or indeed humanlike, form.

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<sup>685</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 157.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid.

<sup>687</sup> J Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 162-163.

<sup>688</sup> Pi-tai Peng, “Angela Carter’s Postmodern Feminism,” 116.

The elderly male Professor, master of marionettes, manipulates this figure who “did not seem so much a cunningly simulated woman as a monstrous goddess, at once preposterous and magnificent, who transcended the notion she was dependent on his hands and appeared wholly real and yet entirely other.”<sup>689</sup> This life-size feminine beauty, replica of the sexual courtesan, who “could have acted as the model for the most beautiful of women,”<sup>690</sup> juxtaposes two states of being, an uncanny figure frail in form and humanity. Lady Purple, as scandalous puppet, is reminiscent of Mademoiselle Zizi, a twenty-four-inch starlet crafted by Frank Mumford who gained recognition as part of a stage act, the Mumford Puppets. From their first performance in Littlehampton in 1946 through to the group’s demise in 1985,<sup>691</sup> the puppeteers and their creations performed a “slick, glamorous, fast-paced international cabaret act”<sup>692</sup> at London’s top nightclubs,<sup>693</sup> and later, at distinguished venues across the globe.<sup>694</sup> Currently on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, this cabaret chanteuse was deemed “sex appeal on strings”<sup>695</sup> due to her voluptuous figure which was modelled on contemporary icons of the period, including Gypsy Rose Lee and Lana Turner. Her flirtatious acts during the 1950s provoked censorship from various entertainment venues: “she was once considered so scandalous she was banned from Birmingham Hippodrome for kissing too many men in the audience.”<sup>696</sup> Both Lady Purple and Mademoiselle Zizi are illusory performers, presented as fetish for the gratification of their, predominantly male, audiences.

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<sup>689</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 26.

<sup>690</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>691</sup> Frank’s last solo performance took place at the Leeds Variety Theatre in 2004.

<sup>692</sup> “Marionette of Mlle. Zizi,” Victoria & Albert Museum, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1363806/marionette-of-mlle-zizi-puppet-mumford-frank/>.

<sup>693</sup> Including “the Coconut Grove, Churchill’s, Governor House, Ciros, the Embassy, the Dorchester and the Savoy Hotels, and the Starlight Room.” – Ibid.

<sup>694</sup> Including “a three-month contract in 1949 in a revue at Le Boeuf Sur le Toit in Paris” and performances for “Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly [...] Madame and General Franco, and [...] the Sultan of Oman.” - Ibid.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> Hannah Furness, “Scandalous Mademoiselle Zizi puppet embraced by the establishment as she goes on display at the V&A,” *The Telegraph*, July 23, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/23/scandalous-mademoiselle-zizi-puppet-embraced-by-the-establishmen/>.

Lady Purple however “was nothing but a curious structure until the Professor touched her strings.”<sup>697</sup> She is only brought to a lifelike state by the hands of her male manipulator. It is he who “filled her with necromantic vigour. He transmitted to her an abundance of the life he himself seemed to possess so tenuously.”<sup>698</sup> Her actions “were not so much an imitation as a distillation and intensification of those of a born woman and so she could become the quintessence of eroticism, for no woman born would have dared to be so blatantly seductive.”<sup>699</sup> Lady Purple’s carnality is in line with Dworkin’s reflections on eroticism for “even when experienced as monstrous, [...] [it] is held to be [...] [her] defining quality.”<sup>700</sup> She is the fetishized medium through which the Professor “revealed his passions.”<sup>701</sup>

From an early age Lady Purple’s monstrosity and sexuality are intertwined, her parents “reared a flower which, although perfumed, was carnivorous. At the age of twelve, she seduced her foster father.”<sup>702</sup> She spends her adolescence in a brothel fulfilling “every rococo desire the mind of man might, in its perverse ingenuity, devise”<sup>703</sup> among “the halls of mirrors, the flagellation parlours, the cabarets of nature-defying copulations and the ambiguous soirees held by men-women and female men.”<sup>704</sup> The Professor’s puppets are said to skilfully perform “these tactical manoeuvres like toy soldiers in a mock battle of carnality,”<sup>705</sup> thus eroticism and brutality are conclusively entwined through the act of performance. Lady Purple’s talents “verged on the unspeakable [...] she became a mistress of the whip before her fifteenth birthday. Subsequently, she graduated in the mysteries of the torture chamber, where she thoroughly researched all manner

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<sup>697</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 26.

<sup>698</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>699</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>700</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography*, 22.

<sup>701</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 26.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*

of ingenious mechanical devices. She utilized a baroque apparatus of funnel, humiliation, syringe, thumbscrew, contempt and spiritual anguish.”<sup>706</sup> Sadomasochism it seems is not adequate, for “soon, either to be rid of them or, simply, for pleasure, she took to murdering her lovers. From the leg of a politician she poisoned she cut out the thighbone and took it to a craftsman who made it into a flute for her.”<sup>707</sup> Her victims are described in distinctly Gothic terms as a “parade of ghastly spectres.”<sup>708</sup> Likewise her visits to these men are presented as a form of contagion “like a plague” but one which brought “both bane and terrible enlightenment.”<sup>709</sup> Utterly contagious, ultimately “she became more ghastly than those she had infected.”<sup>710</sup> Eventually however “disaster obliterated her” in the concluding act of her “desperate decline.”<sup>711</sup> Lady Purple performed necrophiliac acts “on the bloated corpses the sea tossed contemptuously at her feet.”<sup>712</sup> Her sexual rapacity so deeply entrenched at this point that this act “had become entirely mechanical [...] still she repeated her former actions though she herself was utterly other.”<sup>713</sup> This is the pivotal moment in which any residing humanity is finally revoked. In its place Lady Purple becomes “utterly other” nothing “but wood and hair. She became a marionette herself, herself her own replica, the dead yet moving image of the shameless Oriental Venus.”<sup>714</sup> Through these performances Lady Purple’s previously human body becomes a cultural commodity; as such it aligns with Markus Hallensleben’s definition of the performing subject which combines “the political with the theatrical, transgresses race and gender [...] unveils the male gaze of private and public corporeal topographies and finally becomes, as a meta body, a medium that overcomes the borders of artificiality.”<sup>715</sup>

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<sup>706</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

<sup>707</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>708</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>709</sup> Ibid.

<sup>710</sup> Ibid.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid.

<sup>712</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

<sup>714</sup> Ibid.

<sup>715</sup> Markus Hallensleben, “Introduction: Performative Body Spaces”, in *Performative Body Spaces: Corporeal Topographies in Literature, Theatre, Dance and the Visual Arts*, ed. Markus Hallensleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 10.

‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ is an overtly theatrical narrative which continuously highlights its own artificiality. The Professor in his position as puppet-master is said to be “always dusted with a little darkness” as “he propagates the most bewildering enigmas for, the more lifelike his marionettes, the more godlike his manipulations and the more radical the symbiosis between inarticulate doll and articulating fingers.”<sup>716</sup> He is a “consummate virtuoso of puppetry” who tours with his collapsible theatre to all corners of the globe, to “Shanghai, Constantinople and St Petersburg,” and finally to “a dark, superstitious Transylvania.”<sup>717</sup> Such is his skill that puppet and puppeteer appear to merge through the act of performance, thus the Professor realises the “wonders in stimulating life”<sup>718</sup> that Günter Böhmer highlights as the acme of a master puppeteer. This skilful puppet master unifies himself with his artificial performers as he “vitalizes inert stuff with the dynamics of his self.”<sup>719</sup> The Professor, as puppeteer, operates in an intrinsically uncanny space, “in a no-man’s-limbo between the real and that which, although we know very well it is not, nevertheless seems to be real.”<sup>720</sup> Acting as an intermediary between audience and marionette, the inhuman “they, the dolls, the undead,” the Professor eloquently brings to life those “who mimic the living in every detail.”<sup>721</sup> Böhmer, commenting on this lifelikeness stresses that “touchingly lively as their originality may be, and for all their obstinate individuality, in the final analysis all puppets are no more than instruments of the puppeteer.”<sup>722</sup> In the case of Lady Purple that conventional relationship is ultimately subverted as puppet comes to dominate puppeteer.

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<sup>716</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 23.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>718</sup> Günter Böhmer, *Puppets*, trans. Gerald Morice (London: Macdonald and Company, 1971), 22.

<sup>719</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 23-24.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>721</sup> Ibid.

<sup>722</sup> Böhmer, *Puppets*, 5.

Through her performance in “*The Notorious Amours of Lady Purple, the Shameless Oriental Venus*”<sup>723</sup> the marionette Lady Purple, “fills the silences of the men who manipulate her limbs, while she herself is literally voiceless.”<sup>724</sup> Hers is an abject female body only able to communicate through male agency. As Wisker observes Carter’s depiction of the merciless whorish puppet here “exposes male collusion in female subjection and objectification. The Asiatic Professor uses his esoteric knowledge to bring to life a puppet of his own making, nightly playing out his obsessions [...] He constructs the ideal woman, manipulates her and enables others to see his and their dream animated, their violence and lasciviousness enacted.”<sup>725</sup> At the close of each performance the Professor “placed his marionette in a specially constructed box and carried her back to the lodging house [...] for she was too precious to be left in the flimsy theatre and, besides, he could not sleep unless she lay beside him.”<sup>726</sup> This act of confining the fetishized female is one of conclusive control. Lifeless after each sexualised theatrical display, her female body is the subject on which her male manipulators express their erotic desires and suppressed fears.

This nightly dramatization purports to be fiction, myth, and history, and is complicated further by the bodily manipulator, the Professor’s assertion that his marionette is this Lady Purple. The Professor entices his audience each night with “his claim that Lady Purple is eventually transformed into the very marionette who nightly re-enacts the story which is, in fact, her own.”<sup>727</sup> This alteration from human to inhuman transgresses bodily borders. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock contends that the body as uncanny Gothic object “is produced through an inversion of animacy in which, on the one hand, the body is reduced to the status of a thing and, on the other, the thing-

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<sup>723</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 27.

<sup>724</sup> Gina Wisker, “Revenge of the Living Doll: Angela Carter’s Horror Writing”, in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997), 129.

<sup>725</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 44.

<sup>726</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 27.

<sup>727</sup> Gamble, *Angela Carter*, 105.



as-body is endowed with uncanny life.”<sup>728</sup> Lady Purple as puppet embodies the latter, as “a representation of the human form that not only challenge[s] understandings of the line between living and dead, but frequently seem *more alive* than the human beings who encounter”<sup>729</sup> it. Not only is her animation inherently uncanny, but she ultimately, to quote Weinstock, “assumes life at the expense of the living,”<sup>730</sup> in this case the Professor.

In ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ theatrical illusion is utilised to construct a puppet who is concurrently passive object and murderous femme fatale. The Professor toys with his marionette’s transformation between puppet and woman. He asserts that Lady Purple was once a living human but transformed into a puppet “the petrification of a universal whore [...] [when] too much life had negated life itself.”<sup>731</sup> The audience is invited to witness “how unappeasable appetites of Lady Purple turned her at last into the very puppet you see before you, pulled only by the strings of *lust*. Come and see the very doll, the only surviving relic of the shameless Oriental Venus herself.”<sup>732</sup> Such monstrous metamorphosis is typical in Gothic fiction and here Carter subverts established tradition as, as Pi-tai Peng observes, “the same scenario of the doll’s transfiguration is duplicated in the tale itself in a reversed way; Lady Purple is transfigured from a puppet to a woman and is poised at the end of the story to re-enact the scenario instilled by the puppet master.”<sup>733</sup> This monstrous marionette seduces and then torments men, rids them of their money, and does this all “compulsively out of a dry desire insatiable and unknowable to herself.”<sup>734</sup>

The Professor, utterly infatuated with his marionette, kisses her; as she gains “entry into the world by a mysterious loophole in its metaphysics,” she transforms from puppet to “hot, wet,

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<sup>728</sup> Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 72.

<sup>729</sup> Ibid.

<sup>730</sup> Ibid.

<sup>731</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 28.

<sup>732</sup> Ibid.

<sup>733</sup> Pi-tai Peng, “Angela Carter’s Postmodern Feminism,” 107-108.

<sup>734</sup> Ibid, 107.

palpitating flesh.”<sup>735</sup> As Pi-tai Peng observes, “Lady Purple, no matter a puppet or a woman, is always a monster (a sexual predator of men) in the Professor’s scenario.”<sup>736</sup> Here Carter skilfully subverts patriarchal fears of female sexuality. Lady Purple is a sleeping beauty awakened at the Professor’s kiss, but the fairy tale has gone awry:

Her pearl teeth crashed against his with the sound of cymbals and her warm, fragrant breath blew around him like an Italian gale. Across her suddenly moving face flashed a whole kaleidoscope of expression, as though she were running instantaneously through the entire repertory of human feeling, practising, in an endless moment of time, all the scales of emotion as if they were music. Crushing vines, her arms, curled about the Professor’s delicate apparatus of bone and skin with the insistent pressure of an actuality by far more authentically living than that of his own, time-desiccated flesh.<sup>737</sup>

This awakening uncannily echoes the sadomasochistic acts she previously enacted, as Pi-tai Peng concludes, “for the Professor it is the return of the repressed, and for the doll it is the circular paradox haunting her sexed body.”<sup>738</sup> Her concluding spectacular transformation is from manipulated object to vampire; this “image of irresistible evil”<sup>739</sup> exemplifies all that fascinates and disgusts her spectators.

A hybrid of wood and human flesh, this newly created being is an innately uncanny figure. Lady Purple in vampire form, drains the blood from her former master, then makes her way to the nearest brothel, “like a homing pigeon, out of logical necessity.”<sup>740</sup> Despite her escape she is

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<sup>735</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 36.

<sup>736</sup> Pi-tai Peng, “Angela Carter’s Postmodern Feminism,” 108.

<sup>737</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 36.

<sup>738</sup> Pi-tai Peng, “Angela Carter’s Postmodern Feminism,” 108.

<sup>739</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 32.

<sup>740</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

destined to continue her part in these erotic fantasies, trapped in her predetermined role of deadly whore, manipulated by the strings of male pornographic adoration. As Wisker observes, “she freed herself but the scenarios she goes off to enact based on her own decisions are still only those constructed for her by a social mind-set that has limited versions available to women.”<sup>741</sup> “The Loves of Lady Purple’ centres then on the ambiguity of this puppet, whether “she was renewed or newly born, returning to life or becoming alive, awakening from a dream or coalescing into the form of a fantasy generated in her wooden skull by the mere repetition so many times of the same invariable actions.”<sup>742</sup> Lady Purple is a construct of both masculine insecurities and masculine desires. She is a construct that embodies that merging of repulsion and lust that Julia Kristeva identifies as abjection, that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules [...] [that which] disturbs identity, system, order.”<sup>743</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron note that Gothic texts “repeatedly draw attention to the monster’s constructed nature, to the mechanisms of monster production” and in doing so tend to “reveal precisely how the other is constructed and positioned as both alien and inferior.”<sup>744</sup> In “The Loves of Lady Purple’ Carter repeatedly highlights the constructed nature of the titular doll yet ultimately bestows upon her an agency that enables her to escape patriarchal subjugation.

Lady Purple’s form, whether lifeless or living, puppet or human, or somewhere in between is somewhat extraneous; for as Gamble argues, “Lady Purple’s rapacious desires lock her into a savage cycle of endless replication and self-destruction”.<sup>745</sup> At the tale’s conclusion Lady Purple ostensibly liberates herself from the Professor’s entrapment: “she tugged impatiently at the strings which moored her and out they came [...] She stamped her elegant feet to make the new blood

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<sup>741</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 45.

<sup>742</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 37.

<sup>743</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>744</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 264.

<sup>745</sup> Gamble, *Angela Carter*, 105.

flow more freely there. Unfurling and unravelling itself, her hair leaped out of its confinements.”<sup>746</sup> Lady Purple is the epitome of the monstrous femme fatale, she performs all that her audience desire and can be conveniently “put away”<sup>747</sup> for future use. That is, right up until the very moment when the doll, who was ostensibly “only mundane wood,”<sup>748</sup> declines to be packed away. Instead, this monster of the Professor’s making begins her first, and final, self-orchestrated performance.

The closing narrative of ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ poses the question: “had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living, to parody her own performance as a marionette?”<sup>749</sup> Carter’s short story is in the continuing tradition of horror narratives which showcase victimised women, where the female body is consistently demonised, manipulated, and despised. Yet, Carter’s literary depictions of dolls distort the limits of reality, fantasy, human, object; her creations are much more than just “a curious structure,”<sup>750</sup> they are spectacular theatrical illusions, grotesque in their excess, skilled at manipulating desires. Within *The Magic Toysshop* and ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ Carter deftly amalgamates the macabre and the comic, the mythic and the everyday, creating narratives that transgress conventional boundaries, that entertain and frighten, and in which the undead awaken. Wisker deems Carter’s fictional worlds to be “bizarre, unnerving, highly charged, powerfully erotic, and yet [...] also domestic and everyday.”<sup>751</sup> Within these worlds the supernatural threat passes from the unknown to the domestic and the monstrous is made to be at home. Like her feminist contemporaries, across her work, Carter “refuses to reaffirm a status quo which reduces women to stereotypes, objects, puppets [...] [or] terrified dependants.”<sup>752</sup> As such her characters ally with Marie Mulvey-Roberts’s assessment that

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<sup>746</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 37.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>748</sup> Ibid.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>751</sup> Wisker, “Revenge of the Living Doll,” 130.

<sup>752</sup> Wisker, *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction*, 50.

“all bodies [...] fictional or otherwise, are bearers of a politicised message.”<sup>753</sup> In *The Magic Toyshop* and ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’ subservient females are ostensibly reduced to a marionette-like state controlled by tyrannical puppet-masters, yet they ultimately break free of their strings, on occasion altering in form to something arguably more inhuman.

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<sup>753</sup> Marie Mulvey-Roberts, *Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 4.

## **“I Write Horror”: Ramsey Campbell’s Genre Writing**

“I write horror”<sup>754</sup> Ramsey Campbell proclaims on his personal website, a primer he apparently also makes use of at public readings, on conference panels, and in everyday conversation whenever the opportunity arises. Regarding the latter, he is particularly delighted when people inform him “that they don’t like the sort of thing [...] [he writes] although they haven’t read it.”<sup>755</sup> His position within the horror genre is hard to dispute, he has been hailed as “Britain’s most respected living writer of the mode,”<sup>756</sup> by *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* and has been compared to Algernon Blackwood and H.P. Lovecraft, amongst others. The recipient of a great many awards, Campbell’s published works are numerous and include around three hundred short stories, over forty novels, and an impressive array of reviews, documentaries, and interviews.

S. T. Joshi has branded Campbell’s output “fiction of paranoia”<sup>757</sup> for its focus upon “modern life as the catalysts [*sic*] of fear.”<sup>758</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes similarly credits Campbell, alongside other notable writers of weird fiction,<sup>759</sup> for having “kept the flame of the Cthulhu mythos alive throughout the twentieth century.”<sup>760</sup> Far from becoming complacent however, as Aldana Reyes notes, “the twenty-first century has seen Campbell as active and prolific as ever, and returning to old concerns as well as developing new ones.”<sup>761</sup> The critical praise his fiction has received notwithstanding, he remains less commercially successful than his more mainstream counterparts such as Clive Barker, James Herbert, Anne Rice, and of course Stephen King. Aldana Reyes suggests that this is perhaps partly due to the varied nature of horror readership, as he argues

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<sup>754</sup> “Welcome to my Haunted Domain,” Ramsey Campbell, accessed June 19, 2023, <https://knibbworld.com/campbell/>.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid.

<sup>756</sup> Dinah Birch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 499.

<sup>757</sup> S. T. Joshi, *The Modern Weird Tale* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001), 133.

<sup>758</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes, “Post-Millennial Horror, 2000-16”, in *Horror: A Literary History*, ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes (London: The British Library, 2016), 196.

<sup>759</sup> Including August Derleth and Robert Bloch.

<sup>760</sup> Aldana Reyes, “Post-Millennial Horror,” 202.

<sup>761</sup> Ibid, 195.

that “Campbell’s writings are sophisticated and referential, and do not necessarily follow the plotting of more generic fare. For this reason, his work might appeal to a different type of horror reader – one better versed in the history of the genre and less concerned with specific popular trends.”<sup>762</sup> As such, as Keith M. C. O’Sullivan observes, Campbell’s work presents “a number of challenges and contradictions, both within and beyond the Gothic.”<sup>763</sup> His extensive knowledge of, and appreciation for, these genres is evident within his work and can be seen in the skilful way he references, and on occasion subverts, established horror traditions. Campbell himself has commented on the importance of “knowing your tradition” as a genre writer so that one “can see what there is to work with and then take a subject and do new things.”<sup>764</sup> His work has also received scant critical attention.<sup>765</sup> O’Sullivan suggests that this is, in part, because “the academy has not known quite where to place [him]”<sup>766</sup> as an author. This study intends to contribute to the emerging academic research on this critically underrecognized horror writer.

Amongst the mass of contemporary ‘living’ doll horror narratives, the work of Ramsey Campbell is notable. Dolls alongside puppets, mannequins, and similar human-like figures proliferate within his vast opus. As Leigh Blackmore notes, these human doubles are a fitting choice given that the “grim idiotic forces underpinning the world as we experience it are, more often than not, the basis of his work, and he has effectively used the doll/puppet/mannikin motif to convey the effect of these forces.”<sup>767</sup> Campbell’s use of the doll trope is noteworthy and chilling;

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<sup>762</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>763</sup> Keith M. C. O’Sullivan, *Ramsey Campbell* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2023), 1.

<sup>764</sup> Stefan Dziemianowicz, “Interview with Ramsey Campbell”, in *Count of Thirty: A Tribute to Ramsey Campbell*, ed. S. T. Joshi (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>765</sup> S. T. Joshi’s research on Campbell accounts for the majority of work published on the author, it includes *The Count of Thirty: A Tribute to Ramsey Campbell* (1993), *The Core of Ramsey Campbell: A Bibliography and Reader’s Guide* (1995), *Ramsey Campbell and Modern Horror Fiction* (2001), and *Ramsey Campbell, Certainly: Essays and Reviews, 2002-2017* (2021), alongside various other chapters, articles, and columns. Gary William Crawford’s edited collection *Ramsey Campbell: Critical Essays on the Modern Master of Horror* (2014) and Keith M. C. O’Sullivan’s book *Ramsey Campbell* (2023) are welcome additions to this list.

<sup>766</sup> O’Sullivan, *Ramsey Campbell*, 3.

<sup>767</sup> Leigh Blackmore, ““A Puppet’s Parody of Joy”: Dolls, Puppets, and Mannikins as Diabolical Other in Ramsey Campbell”, in *Ramsey Campbell: Critical Essays on the Modern Master of Horror*, ed. Gary William Crawford (Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc, 2014), 37.

he draws on the uncanny nature of the doll's seemingly infinitely malleable form in a calculated and horrifying manner to great effect. The 'living' doll is the central plot device of Campbell's short story 'Cyril' (1969) where it functions as a projection of both latent sexual desires on the part of the female, and emergent ones on the part of the male. An evident embrace of this doll motif is to be found in his short story 'Dolls' (1976) which explores the intertwined relationship between fanatical religion, witchcraft, black magic, and voodoo. A more recent addition to this trend is his short story 'Chucky Comes to Liverpool' (2010) which addressed the moral panic that emerged after the *Child's Play* franchise was linked to the murder of James Bulger in Merseyside in 1993. In his fiction Campbell utilises the doll motif as a source of both literal and figurative horror, blurring the boundaries between non/human monstrosities and in doing so successfully highlights aspects of the uncanny and the macabre inherent in the everyday.



## Sexualising the Synthetic: Ramsey Campbell's 'Lilith's'

Clive Barker in his introduction to Ramsey Campbell's 1987 short story collection *Scared Stiff: Tales of Sex and Death*, declares that the tales within present the reader with "stories that can show us the flesh in all its sensuality, then reveal the bone beneath; or uncover the decay at the heart of an apparently wholesome passion; that takes us into the wildest realms of perversion, and into the fever of obsession."<sup>768</sup> In this collection Campbell constructs a world "where the horrific meets the erotic. Where love and lust blossom into indescribably nightmarish terror."<sup>769</sup> This "indescribably nightmarish terror" is the result of Campbell's skilful marrying of "the horrific with the sexual."<sup>770</sup> The sexual content of these tales is brought to the fore, indeed it is explicit from the title. As Barker pointedly states though, it is much more than mere titillation, "it is never a narrative aside – an overheated fuck before the horrors begin afresh – but rather a central and eloquent part of the story's texture [...] the actors in these scenes (where human) are seldom the deodorized stuff of fantasy, but the same pale-buttocked, stale-sweated individuals we all of us greet each morning in our mirrors."<sup>771</sup>

Campbell has spoken of the influence of horror writers such as H.P. Lovecraft on his work,<sup>772</sup> yet the sexually explicit narratives of *Scared Stiff*, are, as Joshi observes, "very far from what the prudish Lovecraft could have imagined."<sup>773</sup> Michel Houellebecq notes that within H. P. Lovecraft's extensive body of work the topic of sex is notably absent, "there is not a single allusion

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<sup>768</sup> Clive Barker, "The Bare Bones: An Introduction", in *Scared Stiff: Tales of Sex and Death*, Ramsey Campbell (London: Futura Publications, 1991), para. 4.

<sup>769</sup> Ramsey Campbell, *Scared Stiff: Tales of Sex and Death* (London: Futura Publications, 1991), back cover.

<sup>770</sup> Barker, "The Bare Bones," para. 10.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid, para. 11.

<sup>772</sup> "Campbell's early tales inspired by H. P. Lovecraft show how the apprentice learned from his master. In an interview, Campbell remarks that his reading of *Cry Horror!* an early British collection of Lovecraft's tales, turned him into a writer. These early tales written in his teens show how Lovecraft deeply impressed Campbell's consciousness. In these teenage years Campbell was also impressed by August Derleth who published Campbell's first book *The Inhabitant of the Lake and Less Welcome Tenants*, in 1964 through Arkham House." - Gary William Crawford, "Introductions", in *Ramsey Campbell: Critical Essays on the Modern Master of Horror*, ed. Gary William Crawford (Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc, 2014), vii.

<sup>773</sup> S. T. Joshi, *Ramsey Campbell and Modern Horror Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 34.

to [...] [that] which we ascribe great importance: sex [...] truly not one reference. He writes exactly as though [...] [it] did not exist.”<sup>774</sup> As such the erotically driven tales present within *Scared Stiff* stand out from much of Campbell’s other work. Joshi assesses that in Campbell’s fiction, fear is seldom found in ghostly apparitions, supernatural entities, or mystical creatures, rather Campbell’s “horrors are manifestly human in origin.”<sup>775</sup> Indeed, Campbell’s skill lies in his subversion of the everyday. Barker lauds the tales of *Scared Stiff* as “delightfully unsettling,” and praises “the way Ramsey’s brooding, utterly unique vision renders an act familiar to us all so fretful, so strange, so *chilling*.”<sup>776</sup> Mirroring Stephen King’s comment<sup>777</sup> on the distinctiveness of Campbell’s style Barker concludes that this “sexual material is marked by [...] [his] unique vision, just as everything in his fiction is marked.”<sup>778</sup> Within *Scared Stiff* there is one short story in particular, ‘Lilith’s’, which showcases explicit sexuality and overt monstrosity within a carefully crafted ‘living’ doll narrative.

‘Lilith’s’ is primarily concerned with the nature of the non/human relationship, within it Campbell describes in macabre depth one man’s obsession with his sex doll, and the horrors that ensue when she takes on a life of her own. Bored by the monotony of his daily life and frustrated with his stagnant relationship, Palin, an Inland Revenue employee, becomes increasingly fixated on a shop he passes on his daily commute, “if the bus failed to stop by the street, angry frustration welled in him, threatening to explode his silence [...] The morning journeys began to frustrate him too, for then the bus used another road.”<sup>779</sup> Specifically, his fixation is with one item that lies within the shop, an item that “looked something like a person. It sat pinkly in the display, wearing a woman’s black underwear [...] [it had] a huge white blossom in place of a head.”<sup>780</sup> This fetish aligns with Georges Bataille’s theories on eroticism, “at first sight sexual objects excite alternate

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<sup>774</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (London: Gollancz, 2019), 60.

<sup>775</sup> Joshi, *Ramsey Campbell and Modern Horror Fiction*, 8.

<sup>776</sup> Barker, “The Bare Bones,” para. 13.

<sup>777</sup> In *Danse Macabre* King affirms that Campbell’s writing is “strange; so uniquely Campbell that it might as well be trademarked.” - Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Warner Books, 1993), 397.

<sup>778</sup> Barker, “The Bare Bones,” para. 11.

<sup>779</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 50.

<sup>780</sup> *Ibid.*

attraction and repulsion, hence the taboo and its suspension,<sup>781</sup> this ambiguous doll both fascinates and disgusts Palin.

Lilith's, it transpires is a sex shop, named as Blackmore highlights, after the biblical figure, the "dark female twin of Eve [...] who was supposedly demonic, but is a classic instance of the Diabolical Other, of the demonization projected onto strong women."<sup>782</sup> After eventually plucking up the courage to browse, Palin becomes immediately infatuated with both the rubber doll that occupies the shop's window, "a Love Mate ... its limbs and body were well-shaped, even attractive if that kind of thing attracted you," and her human counterpart who runs the shop, whose "large dark eyes gazed from her heartshaped face [...] [whose] beauty shivered through him."<sup>783</sup> Thus the repulsion that the doll initially provoked "cedes to attraction as horror gives way to romance."<sup>784</sup> After his relationship with Emily irrevocably breaks down Palin purchases the "Love Mate"<sup>785</sup> to fulfill his sexual desires. The doll's body appears to glow "warmly, enticing," in a grotesque exaggeration of feminine beauty ideals, "unnatural only in its perfection."<sup>786</sup> The doll's head is at first covered, thus enabling Palin to seamlessly project his fantasies onto the doll, for "his dreams were supposed to give the doll a face, the face he most wanted; only he could provide that."<sup>787</sup> Haunted by his recollections of the shopkeeper who sold him the doll, of "the girl's face in the dimness, her body hidden behind the proffered body [...] the heart-shaped face, her glowing smile, gradually gathering light to its outlines, gazing intimately at him,"<sup>788</sup> the two figures merge to fuel his desires until he sees only "her face, on the perfected body."<sup>789</sup>

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<sup>781</sup> Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969), 65.

<sup>782</sup> Blackmore, "'A Puppet's Parody of Joy,'" 41.

<sup>783</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 51.

<sup>784</sup> Fred Botting, *Gothic Romanced: Consumption, Gender and Technology in Contemporary Fictions* (London: Routledge, 2008), 2.

<sup>785</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 51.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>787</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>788</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>789</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

The shopkeeper's appeal ultimately lies in her passivity, "she wasn't like Emily, she hadn't encouraged him only to make him struggle to please her. She simply waited, displaying her smile on the velvety dimness, an intimate smile if he wanted it to be. She would be willing, anxious to please, peaceful and quiet and submissive. She was there if he wanted her."<sup>790</sup> The shopkeeper reluctantly accepts Palin's offer of ten pounds for the doll, appearing "as if she were submitting to the inevitable, somehow her tone included Palin too."<sup>791</sup> To Palin her submission is desirable, her willingness admirable, as such his desires align with Dworkin's formative assessment of objectification in her seminal text, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, "the male is contaminated and distressed by any contact with woman-not-as-object."<sup>792</sup> The "Love Mate"<sup>793</sup> in Campbell's 'Lilith's', and by extension the sex doll, is a disturbing extension of this, for according to Dworkin "men want women to be objects, controllable as objects are controllable."<sup>794</sup> In Palin's case this purchase is fuelled by his desire "to have a woman who would do exactly what he wanted, whenever he wanted it," to "to have a body waiting when he came home, ready for whatever he'd worked up during the day."<sup>795</sup> A clear parallel can be drawn here with the 'meat puppets' that populate William Gibson's cult novel *Neuromancer* (1984). These robotic prostitutes satisfy the needs of their human counterparts who both crave companionship and wish to act out their desires uninhibited. The 'meat puppets' are implanted with neuroelectronic chips enabling them to fall into a sleep-like state while their bodies remain responsive to their client's particular demands, "wake up sore, sometimes, but that's it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in when it's all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for."<sup>796</sup> Likewise, in Josh Whedon's television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) and *Dollhouse* (2009), Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley's *Humans* (2015), and Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's *Westworld* (2016) synthetic

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<sup>790</sup> Ibid, 52-53.

<sup>791</sup> Ibid, 55-56.

<sup>792</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography*, 64.

<sup>793</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 51.

<sup>794</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography*, 65.

<sup>795</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 53.

<sup>796</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Penguin, 2008), 158.

doll-like females are positioned as malleable objects to be used at will by their, principally male, human counterparts.

In 'Lilith's' Campbell illustrates in graphic detail the carnality of Palin's obsession, "the pink genitals yawned from the box. He found the bare pink hole unnerving, so still in its cardboard frame. After a while he grasped the upturned buttocks to pull out the doll. They felt velvety as peaches, and shockingly warm."<sup>797</sup> Through this sexual act the human male forces the artificial female to conform to what Dworkin denotes as "his supremely ridiculous definition of her as sexual object," and thus fetishizes the doll's body both "as a whole and in its parts."<sup>798</sup> Regardless of Palin's revulsion at the doll's face, or lack thereof, "on the neck of the figure was a bulb of coralline convolutions, as if white brains had boiled from the head," his physical attraction persists: "the body was beautiful – the long slim arms and delicate hands, the smooth thighs mysteriously closed, the round full breasts."<sup>799</sup> This attraction is based on an unrealistic model of feminine beauty. Palin's sexual encounters with the doll are persistently framed within the shadow of his failed relationship, "he was sure disappointment lay there, in the bald pinkish crevice."<sup>800</sup> In contrast to the confrontation he so despised in his previous human-to-human relationship, the inherent submissiveness of this doll-to-human relationship pleases Palin. Paralleling the attraction he felt for the compliant shopkeeper, his desire for the doll lies in the possibility of his domination: "he could take as long as he liked, move her any way he wanted. He wouldn't have to suffer an unsatisfactory position [...] Now he could have exactly what he wanted."<sup>801</sup> This desire reinforces the doll's position as passive object and reflects patriarchal norms.

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<sup>797</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 57.

<sup>798</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography*, 22.

<sup>799</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 53.

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>801</sup> *Ibid*, 58-59.

When Palin returns to the shop, he finds “little to see except smoke and charring. The houses on both sides protruded bricks and blackened struts. Between them lay a black tangle from which poked sooty metal, bits of glass coated with smoke, crumbling bricks, most of LILITH’S signal.”<sup>802</sup> On learning that the shopkeeper has perished in the fire, he feels no sympathy, adamant that “she was still alive, in his mind.”<sup>803</sup> He is insistent that she could stay living through the doll’s “submissive body. He would keep her alive [...] He was anxious to make love to her body – because it was *her* body, he’d wished it on her. He felt she would like to be remembered so.”<sup>804</sup> Yet, Palin becomes increasingly frustrated with the constraints of an artificial being, one that “was alive only when he made it live. But he knew that wasn’t true, for he could feel its presence now.”<sup>805</sup> The desired doll, whose initial appeal lay in its function “as a temporary egress from constraint”<sup>806</sup> now possesses a “corporeal fluidity [...] [a] simultaneity of anxiety and desire”<sup>807</sup> that Cohen identifies as central to the Gothic monster. This trait ensures that “the monster will always dangerously entice” as it occupies “that ambiguous, primal space between fear and attraction”<sup>808</sup> that Kristeva identifies as abjection.

The doll’s abject presence continues to haunt Palin. He “wondered why he’d been so morbid as to sit a corpse in his front room. No, not a corpse – something that had never been alive. He was beginning to dislike the sight of it.”<sup>809</sup> His disturbed psyche makes him begin to question why he had purchased the doll at all, for “he had never found such things attractive,” and this leads him to conclude that conceivably the shopkeeper was a witch, who had “learned something from the books to lure him in.”<sup>810</sup> O’Sullivan deduces that “both the sources and the

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<sup>802</sup> Ibid, 59-60.

<sup>803</sup> Ibid.

<sup>804</sup> Ibid.

<sup>805</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>806</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”, in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>807</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid.

<sup>809</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 65.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid.

representations of horror in much of [...] [Campbell's] work are interiorised as opposed to externalised and physical in nature."<sup>811</sup> The figure of the fetishized 'living' doll in 'Lilith's' is an intriguing example of this. Within the fictional realm the doll is a very real entity upon which Palin enacts his desires, yet, as an inherently uncanny figure its position is by nature obscure, and the horror that it elicits stems, at this point at least, solely from the psyche of its human possessor.

Monsters are firm fixtures of the horror genre, whether "vampire, zombie, werewolf, witch, mummy, or some more eccentric creature," whether "non-human, super-human, or sub-human," Joshi argues that the monster "presents an *intellectual* challenge by its mere existence; for such an entity, obeying laws of Nature very different from the ones we know, reveals an appalling deficiency in our conceptions of the universe."<sup>812</sup> Campbell's monsters are, as Joshi notes, often of a "highly peculiar nature, refusing to fit conventionally into any of the standard tropes evolved by old-time Gothicism."<sup>813</sup> The figure of the 'living' doll in 'Lilith's' likewise refutes easy categorisation, eliciting in its human counterpart an "eeriness of fevered longing"<sup>814</sup> that Eric G. Wilson identifies as one of the central attributes of such an uncanny entity.

Palin's frustration and distaste promptly turn to anger and violent disposal of the doll. He first covers the doll's blank head, before carrying it into the backyard, and thrusting "it into the bin, tangling its limbs."<sup>815</sup> The doll, however, is not so easily confined and alarmingly re-emerges "like a faceless Jack-in-the-box."<sup>816</sup> To impede any further reappearances he extricates the doll and hacks it to pieces, to conclusively "keep her down," before finally thrusting "the head [...] [and limbs] into the garbage."<sup>817</sup> Yet the fixed binary distinctions between artificial and natural are

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<sup>811</sup> O'Sullivan, *Ramsey Campbell*, 6.

<sup>812</sup> Joshi, *Ramsey Campbell and Modern Horror Fiction*, 58.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>814</sup> Eric G. Wilson, *The Melancholy Android: On the Psychology of Sacred Machines* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 18.

<sup>815</sup> Campbell, *Scared Stiff*, 65.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>817</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

proven malleable as the doll returns to haunt him, with “a charred fixed grin, eyes like holes in coal.”<sup>818</sup> He awakens from a nightmare:

Screaming he was lying face down on the bed, in her. The bag had gone. Dawn twilight crawled on her face. For a moment it gave her a face [...] Then he was screaming again, struggling with her slippery limbs; his erection nailed him in her. He began to wrench at her head. The neck gave way almost at once. The head rolled from the pillow; he heard it thud on the floor.<sup>819</sup>

Where he had previously only derived pleasure from such acts, this is a nightmarish entrapment for his “Love Mate”<sup>820</sup> has taken on a life of her own. The ‘living’ doll’s corpse-like qualities are emphasised as she enacts her final revenge: “the thighs clamped about him in a last convulsion, stiff as rigor mortis.”<sup>821</sup> In ‘Lilith’s’, Campbell embraces grotesque fetishism in all its forms to chilling effect.

Horror as a genre has long dealt in taboo, as Barker construes “it speaks of death, madness and the transgression of moral and physical boundaries. It raises the dead to life and slaughters infants in their cribs; it makes monsters of household pets and begs our affection for psychos.”<sup>822</sup> Campbell’s *Scared Stiff* posits an addition to this list: “the forbidden substrata of sexuality,”<sup>823</sup> specifically to quote Barker, “the obsessions with parts and people we keep in our private thoughts; the acts we dream of but dare not openly desire; the flesh we long to wear, the pains we yearn to endure or inflict in the name of love.”<sup>824</sup> *Scared Stiff* is an intriguing addition to the adult horror

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<sup>818</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>819</sup> Ibid, 66-67.

<sup>820</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>821</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>822</sup> Barker, “The Bare Bones,” para. 16.

<sup>823</sup> Ibid, para. 17.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid.



collective which lacks the crassness that its title arguably implies and showcases instead the macabrely provocative talents of its author. 'Lilith's' is an eloquently crafted 'living' doll narrative that shrewdly subverts the fetishized doll's conventional position as passive object as the submissive doll of Palin's imaginings transforms into an altogether more tangibly hostile threat.

## Conclusion

Commenting upon the relationship between children and play, Bruno Bettelheim articulates that “to the child, there is no clear line separating objects from living things; and whatever has life has life very much like our own.”<sup>825</sup> Dworkin identifies a reversal of this in adult relationships, contending that women are frequently reduced to a non-human position, for “adult men are convinced and sincere in their perception of adult women in particular as objects.”<sup>826</sup> This perception has led to the habitual fetishization of the female form, and, in turn the creation of artificial ‘women’. In the 1950s computer scientists developed machine learning, in the 1990s they constructed intuitive user interfaces and affective computing,<sup>827</sup> today they have brought us interactive sex dolls, so called sex robots, or rather, the promise of them. Chair of the European Robotics Research Network, Henrik Christensen, predicted in 2006 that “people will be having sex with robots within five years.”<sup>828</sup> His prediction, while some way off, highlights consumer interest in the industry; low-cost sex toys are now commonplace, readily available, and a key component of an industry that is expected to be worth 52.7 billion dollars by 2026.<sup>829</sup> In recent years developers have made significant technological advancements in the fields of sex technology and robotics. Significant developments in materials science over the past few decades has facilitated the development of sex dolls that appear vastly more anthropomorphic than their inflatable predecessors.<sup>830</sup> As David Levy notes, “sophisticated humanoids such as the Replée Q1

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<sup>825</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) 46.

<sup>826</sup> Dworkin, *Pornography*, 49.

<sup>827</sup> Affective computing, also known as emotional AI, is “the study and development of systems and devices that can recognize, interpret, process, and simulate human affects.” – Ahmed Banafa, “What is Affective Computing?,” OpenMind BBVA, June 6, 2016, <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/technology/digital-world/what-is-affective-computing/>.

<sup>828</sup> David Levy, “Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers” (paper presented at the IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation, Rome, Italy, April 14, 2007), <http://www.roboethics.org/icra2007/contributions.html>.

<sup>829</sup> “Size of the sex toy market worldwide from 2016 to 2030,” Statista, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/587109/size-of-the-global-sex-toy-market/>.

<sup>830</sup> The exact origin of this type of doll is unknown, but they are believed to date back to the early twentieth century. Certainly, by the middle of the century they were being sold commercially, “in the swinging 1960s, blow-up dolls appeared in adult stores and X-rated catalogues, and some porn cinemas sold them alongside popcorn and

and Replée Q2 have already been developed that are humanlike in appearance.”<sup>831</sup> The vast commercial potential of artificially intelligent sex dolls will inevitably drive their development.

Crucially, these mechanical dolls do not yet exist commercially, though some specialist companies are in the process of developing prototypes. As Levy asserts “at present there is no working definition of a sex robot, and in reality there are really no sex robots. The introduction of a robotic or AI programs into a doll is enough to claim it as a ‘sex-robot,’ but these mechanistic dolls more closely resemble automata.”<sup>832</sup> The logistics involved in bringing these dolls to market is complex; for the product to be viable they need to be able to stand without assistance, support their own weight, and move of their own accord; given roboticists’ ongoing struggle to replicate smooth human movement this reality is some way off. Furthermore, the dolls will need to feel real, the intricacies and irregularities of human skin are difficult to successfully replicate. Yet, as Kathleen Richardson notes, “developments in the manufacturing of artificial materials, such as silicon, have allowed dolls to look more lifelike than their predecessors.”<sup>833</sup> Any attempt to convincingly replicate humanity in this way however is in danger of entering the uncanny valley.

The fetishized dolls that do exist are fully customizable and constructed to fit the individual’s particular specifications, no matter how niche.<sup>834</sup> While dolls marketed at women do exist, ninety five percent of the market, as it stands, is directed towards heterosexual men.<sup>835</sup> The design of these dolls is largely shaped by the pornography industry and significantly “the type of

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lubricants” – Jeanette Winterson, *12 Bytes: How Artificial Intelligence Will Change the Way We Live and Love* (London: Vintage, 2022), 144.

<sup>831</sup> Levy, “Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers.”

<sup>832</sup> Ibid.

<sup>833</sup> Kathleen Richardson, “Sex Robot Matters: Slavery, the Prostituted, and the Rights of Machines,” *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 35:2 (June 2016): 48.

<sup>834</sup> The, largely online, community of people who consider themselves to be in a relationship with these dolls are known as iDollators.

<sup>835</sup> For the statistics on this see Winterson, *12 Bytes*, 157.

relationship that is used as the model for the buyer/owner of the [...] [doll] is inspired, not by an empathetic human encounter, but a non-empathetic form of encounter characterized by the buying and selling of sex.”<sup>836</sup> The demand for sex doll brothels is also growing, “their popularity on the retail market has [...] spawned a doll variant of the more traditional form of ‘escort’ service.”<sup>837</sup> In the mid-2000s sex entrepreneurs in South Korea, taking inspiration from their success in Japan, launched doll-for-hire businesses as a way of evading the country’s laws on prostitution.<sup>838</sup> Their popularity, as Levy notes, “is a clear indicator of things to come. If static sex dolls can be hired out successfully, then sexbots with moving components seem certain to be even more successful.”<sup>839</sup> Disturbingly “the making of these dolls does not stop at adults [...] child sex dolls resembling five-year-old girls are produced by company Trottla,”<sup>840</sup> and variations on these have been sold worldwide by mainstream retailers.<sup>841</sup>

These synthetic doppelgängers mimic human appearance, albeit an idealised version. Some contain voice activated software, others house responsive motors in various parts of their body. Of the many sex robots currently under development the most likely to make it to market is ‘Harmony’, a top of the range ‘Real Doll’ manufactured by American company Abyss Creations.

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<sup>836</sup> Richardson, “Sex Robot Matters,” 48.

<sup>837</sup> Levy, “Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers.”

<sup>838</sup> The link between dolls and prostitution is multi-layered, if as Anthony Ferguson maintains “the female sex doll represents women in her most objectified form it comes as no surprise that etymologically the word ‘doll’, as a colloquial term, has conversely been used to refer to a prostitute.” – Anthony Ferguson, *The Sex Doll: A History* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010), 5.

<sup>839</sup> Levy, “Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers.”

<sup>840</sup> Richardson, “Sex Robot Matters,” 48.

<sup>841</sup> Such as Amazon, eBay, and Wish. In 2018 child sex dolls were “pulled from sale by online retail giant Amazon.com Inc after widespread criticism from a watchdog and charities in Britain over concerns that people who use such lifelike dolls may go on to sexually abuse children.” – “Amazon pulls child sex dolls after criticism from UK watchdog,” Reuters, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-amazon-com-children-sexcrimes-idUSKBN1HJ2BG>. Amazon stated that the items had been listed by a third-party seller. In the UK, as it currently stands the import, distribution, and selling of a child sex doll is illegal but possession remains legal. The Creeper Act proposed to the United States Congress in 2017 made “it a crime to import, or knowingly use a common carrier or interactive computer service to transport in interstate or foreign commerce, a child sex doll.” – “H.R.4655 - CREEPER Act of 2017,” Congress, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/4655>. The updated Creeper Act 2.0, put forward in 2023, includes legislation taken from Florida law that also makes possession and sale of the dolls illegal. The updated bill “establishes new federal criminal offenses for conduct involving child sex dolls.” – “H.R.2877 - CREEPER Act 2.0,” Congress, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/2877?s=1&r=5>.

Popularised by artist and maker Matt McMullen these life-sized dolls “made with PVC skeletons with steel joints and silicone skin”<sup>842</sup> retail for over fifteen thousand dollars. ‘Harmony’ is voice activated, her artificial intelligence is housed in an app called ‘Real Doll X’, which promises the buyer, “the perfect companion in the palm of your hands. Goodbye loneliness! With RealDoll X you can create and customize your own AI driven virtual RealDoll using cutting edge technology, and take her with you wherever you go.”<sup>843</sup> This emphasis on companionship is in stark contrast to her highly sexualised physique. The manufacturers, when questioned on the realism of these dolls, retorted that some “are 100 percent modelled off real women” but acknowledged that largely they are exaggerated, for they “like to make it the *ideal* female form.”<sup>844</sup> Despite this unrealistic portrayal McMullen resolutely rejects the idea “that having regular sex with a docile doll will cause a man to treat a real woman less considerately, or respectfully, than he otherwise would.”<sup>845</sup>

If the press is to be believed,<sup>846</sup> the moral danger that these dolls pose is imminent, indeed as Jenny Kleeman notes, “the past few years have seen a cascade of [...] [sensational] headlines about sex robots.”<sup>847</sup> Indeed, on the rare occasion that these dolls have been introduced to the public the result has been far from positive. In 2017 Synthea Amatus’s sex robot ‘Samantha’ whilst on display at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria, was “so

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<sup>842</sup> Levy, “Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers.”

<sup>843</sup> “The Perfect Companion in the Palm of Your Hands,” Real Doll X, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://www.realdollx.ai/>.

<sup>844</sup> Jenny Kleeman, *Sex Robots and Vegan Meat: Adventures at the Frontier of Birth, Food, Sex and Death* (London: Picador, 2020), 8.

<sup>845</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *12 Bytes: How Artificial Intelligence Will Change the Way We Live and Love* (London: Vintage, 2022), 148.

<sup>846</sup> Examples of this are numerous. *The Daily Star* announced that “a sex robot company is offering clones that can replace dead partners using groundbreaking 3D modelling.”- Tom Towers, “Sex robot ‘clones’ of dead partners created with 3D scans ‘could walk in near future,’” *The Daily Star*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/world-news/sex-robot-clones-dead-partners-23797892>. *The Sun* warned that “sex robots could soon feel sensations ‘just like humans’ after creepy ‘printed skin’ developed giving a sense of touch.” – Chris Bradford, “FEELING IT’ Sex robots could soon feel sensations ‘just like humans’ after creepy ‘printed skin’ developed giving a sense of touch,” *The Sun*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/18811097/sex-robots-feel-things-humans-printed-skin/>. *The Daily Mail* printed that companies were “letting paedophiles live out their perverted sexual fantasies using CHILD sex robots.” Stephen Matthews and John Ely, “Letting paedophiles live out their perverted sexual fantasies using CHILD sex robots might stop them harming kids, researchers controversially suggest” *The Daily Mail*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-11469643/Paedophiles-allowed-use-child-sex-robots-live-fantasies-researchers-argue.html>.

<sup>847</sup> Kate Devlin, *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 9.

severely molested by a group of men, it was sent home in desperate need of repair and badly soiled.”<sup>848</sup> In spite of the extensive damage, creator Sergi Santos asserted that the doll was developed “to take a lot and would pull through.”<sup>849</sup> Artificial intelligence engineer Douglas Hine, creator of the ‘TrueCompanion’ line of dolls, is developing a robotic version, ‘Roxxy’. Her ‘Frigid Farrah’ setting: “a mode in which she has been programmed to resist sexual advances and which will allow men to act out rape fantasies”<sup>850</sup> has prompted public outcry. Feminist author Laura Bates condemned the doll, describing her as “the sex robot that’s yours to rape for just \$9,995”<sup>851</sup> Whilst barrister Kate Parker, called for these ‘rape robots’ to be criminalised, arguing that “the sophistication of the technology behind Roxxy marks a step forward for robotics. For human society, it’s an unquestionable regression.”<sup>852</sup> Crucially these dolls, regardless of how lifelike they may appear, cannot consent. Consequently they “explicitly encourage the owners to act out sexual entitlement and aggression on these plastic bodies,”<sup>853</sup> thus reinforcing “the false conviction that men have a right to sex, a right that they can coercively enforce.”<sup>854</sup> Of course these fetishized dolls are not responsible for the fetishization of the female form that engulfs contemporary society, that subsists regardless, but they do cede to it.

Martha C. Nussbaum in ‘The Feminist Critique of Liberalism’ questions the established societal positioning of women as submissive object and men as possessive tyrant. Nussbaum

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<sup>848</sup> Sian Norris, “The Damage to Samantha the Sex Robot Shows Male Aggression Being Normalised,” *The New Statesman*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2017/09/damage-samantha-sex-robot-shows-male-aggression-being-normalised>.

<sup>849</sup> Ibid.

<sup>850</sup> Jenny Kleeman, “Should We Ban Sex Robots While We Have The Chance?,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2017, [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/25/ban-sex-robots-dolls-market?CMP=twl\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/25/ban-sex-robots-dolls-market?CMP=twl_gu).

<sup>851</sup> Laura Bates, “The Trouble With Sex Robots,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/opinion/sex-robots-consent.html>.

<sup>852</sup> Kate Parker, “A Sinister Development in Sexbots and a Strong Case for Criminalisation,” *The Times*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/a-sinister-development-in-sexbots-and-a-strong-case-for-criminalisation-qxxxjkmsl>.

<sup>853</sup> Norris, “The Damage to Samantha the Sex Robot.”

<sup>854</sup> Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 95.

deems these roles to be products of societal conditioning, observing that if philosophical tradition implies that “even something as apparently deep-seated as the character of a person’s erotic desire may contain a socially learnt component,” perhaps “it may therefore be not too utopian to imagine a culture in which men’s sexual desire for women will not commonly be associated with projects of possession and control, and in which female sexual agency will not inspire fear and suspicion.”<sup>855</sup> Given the increasing demand for, and financial investment in, sex technologies catering predominantly to masculine heterosexual desires, this utopia remains, for the moment at least, out of reach.

Commodity fetishism, as embodied in the figure of the commercialised fetish doll, typifies what Bill Brown identifies as the “sex appeal of the inorganic,” and speaks to a cultural ongoing “erotic fascination with the material object world.”<sup>856</sup> The horror genre takes this fascination and twists it into something altogether more grotesque. Horror narratives, are, after all, as George Stade notes, the “re-embodiments of secret fears and desires” of the “monstrous hungers and frightful lusts”<sup>857</sup> of their audiences. Within their carefully construed erotic doll narratives, both Carter and Campbell position the sexualised doll, or doll-like female, as more than submissive objects, they are granted agency, indeed, in some cases, life, and possess the ability to evoke both fear and desire in their living counterparts. Thus these fetishized dolls align with Cohen’s assertion that “fear of the monster is really a kind of desire.”<sup>858</sup> As Blackmore asserts, these seemingly conflicting sentiments of sexuality and horror are in ‘Lilith’s’ “cogently expressed in the form of the sex doll.”<sup>859</sup> Similarly, these idealised dolls are, in *The Magic Toyshop* and ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’, as identified by the author herself, grotesque expressions of “the nameless essence of the

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<sup>855</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

<sup>856</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>857</sup> George Stade, “Night of Our Ghostly Longings,” *The New York Times Book Review*, (October 27 1985): 42.

<sup>858</sup> Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 16.

<sup>859</sup> Blackmore, “A Puppet’s Parody of Joy,” 41.

idea of woman, a metaphysical abstraction of the female.”<sup>860</sup> Smith contends that principally the doll figure functions as fetish; “a thing, a commodity, a possession, an obsession, an object of desire, an object of love, of worship, adoration, devotion, and object of lust and even an object for sex.”<sup>861</sup> *The Magic Toyshop*, ‘The Loves of Lady Purple’, and ‘Lilith’s’ align with this theory, whilst highlighting that in addition these “object[s] of desire”<sup>862</sup> are manifestly objects of terror. In their fiction both Carter and Campbell skilfully showcase the ‘living’ doll figure as an uncanny doppelgänger which possess a grotesquely dead-alive charm.

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<sup>860</sup> Carter, *Fireworks* (1993), 30.

<sup>861</sup> Smith, *The Erotic Doll*, 9.

<sup>862</sup> *Ibid.*



### Chapter Three: Doll as Memorialised Object

“My *Aufstehpuppe* was a crude antique  
When first I met him. Soon he might descend  
Further into our family, there to speak  
Of how we are defeated in the end,  
  
But still begin again in the new lives  
Which sort our junk, deciding what to keep.  
Let them keep this, a cheap doll that continues  
To stand straight even as I fall asleep.”<sup>863</sup>

#### **Clive James, ‘Living Doll’**

South of Mexico City, amidst a mass of canals in Mexico’s Xochimilco district lies what has become known as the Island of the Dolls.<sup>864</sup> The island is aptly named for strewn across it are hundreds of dolls, many in various stages of decay or disrepair. Several are missing appendages, others have had their discarded limbs substituted with another’s. Across the island marred porcelain heads swing from weathered ropes, while decomposing plush bodies lie impaled upon rotting wooden posts. The weather too takes its toll: the sun mottles synthetic faces; mould seeps into cloth; rain tangles strands of human-like hair. Spiders draw webs across abandoned eye sockets, birds craft nests within the recesses of a fractured skull. These dolls have been a mainstay of the island for decades, their mutilated bodies seemingly merged with the vegetation that threatens to engulf them.

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<sup>863</sup> Clive James, *Sentenced to Life* (London: Picador, 2015), 27.

<sup>864</sup> Or Island of the Dead Dolls. In Spanish *Isla de las Muñecas* or *La Isla de las Muñecas*.

Local lore tells of a man, Don Julian Santana Barrera, who retreated to this uninhabited island in the late 1950s, and presently “learned from those nearby of the dark legends of the girl who had succumbed to the water and died while playing with friends; her spirit continued to play along the banks of the canal, refusing to pass over. Alone on the island, Barrera began to hear the dead child’s voice.”<sup>865</sup> Shortly after this he began collecting dolls, leaving these inhuman effigies as an offering to this child. “He fished discarded dolls from the canals, and on his rare trips into town, he rummaged through trash bins in search of more [...] he didn’t care what their condition was like – headless, limbless, sun-bleached, burnt – he took any and all and hung them up wherever there was an available tree limb or fence post.”<sup>866</sup> Some locals believed this to be the behaviour of a madman who was ostensibly convinced that these dolls were his actual children, others have reported incidents where these seemingly inanimate objects came to life. It’s said that these dolls can sometimes be seen at night wandering the island, chattering amongst themselves in hushed whispers. In due course “the island was forgotten to time [...] [Yet] Barrera continued to build his home there with the dolls, even constructing a small hut to shield his more prized dolls from the elements to make the ghost girl happy and mollify the evil spirits.”<sup>867</sup> 1990 was a significant year for the island as it was awarded national heritage status and water traffic in the area quickly resumed. On the 21st of April 2001, misfortune hit the island when Barrera’s nephew, Anastasio, discovered his uncle’s body in the very same canal where the child had drowned years before. The island is open to all, some who make the trip bring their own dolls to add to the island’s growing populace and “Anastasio welcomes anyone who makes the long trip and wants to hear the stories of how the dolls seemingly come alive after the heat of the day is extinguished, their voices carrying on the water – asking you to join them.”<sup>868</sup> Barrera’s death acted as a catalyst, turning this small manmade island into the grotesquely bizarre tourist attraction that it has become.

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<sup>865</sup> Stacey Graham, *Haunted Stuff: Demonic Dolls, Screaming Skulls & Other Creepy Collectibles* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2014), 51.

<sup>866</sup> John Harker, *Demonic Dolls: True Tales of Terrible Toys* (Charleston: CreateSpace, 2015), 89.

<sup>867</sup> Graham, *Haunted Stuff*, 52.

<sup>868</sup> *Ibid.*

If you suffer from pediophobia, defined by *The Dictionary of Psychology* as a “morbid fear of dolls,”<sup>869</sup> Isla de las Muñecas is certainly one place to avoid. If one doll is enough to evoke a visceral response, then hundreds of them – decayed, mutilated, utterly abject – are grotesque. These mangled dolls align with Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund’s categorisation of the grotesque body as a muddled combination of human and non-human attributes, as “incomplete, lacking in vital parts,”<sup>870</sup> or possessing a corporeal deformity consisting of additional body parts. Such hybrid forms, they suggest, “disrupt the borders separating what is acceptable within the categories of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’” and thus, “foreground the limits of the human body, policing the margins of human classification, [...] [and] also engender fear, rather than stability, through frightening depictions of what happens when the boundaries of classification give way to monstrous hybrid figures.”<sup>871</sup>

It is evident, as Richard Sharpley notes, “that visitors have long been attracted to places or events associated in one way or another with death, disaster and suffering.”<sup>872</sup> Dark Tourism, a phrase first coined by Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon in a special issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, capitalises on this established interest.<sup>873</sup> Dark tourism sites and attractions, have, over the last century, become increasingly more prevalent and diverse. They now, “vary enormously, from ‘playful’ houses of horror, through places of pilgrimage such as the graves or death sites of famous people, to the Holocaust death camps or sites of major disasters or atrocities.”<sup>874</sup> This boom however problematises attempts to clearly define the term, indeed as Sharpley observes, “such is the variety of sites, attractions and experiences now falling under the

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<sup>869</sup> Raymond J. Corsini, ed., *The Dictionary of Psychology* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 703.

<sup>870</sup> Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

<sup>871</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>872</sup> Richard Sharpley, “Shedding Light on Dark Tourism: An Introduction”, in *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practise of Dark Tourism*, eds. Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2009), 5.

<sup>873</sup> They used the expression in their “JFK and dark tourism: A fascination with assassination” article in the 1996, volume 2, issue 4 edition of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*. The term was used again in 2002 as the title of their book. Foley and Lennon’s *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, as Sharpley notes, “introduced the term to a wider audience, stimulating a significant degree of academic interest and debate.” – *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>874</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

collective umbrella of dark tourism that the meaning of the term has become increasingly diluted and fuzzy.”<sup>875</sup> This is an issue further complicated by the range of alternative terminology presently employed by dark tourism scholars including: “thanatourism,”<sup>876</sup> “morbid tourism,”<sup>877</sup> and “milking the macabre.”<sup>878</sup> This study adopts Philip Stone’s definition of dark tourism as “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre.”<sup>879</sup>

The following brief examination of select texts delivers an impression of the type of doll-centric Gothic narratives that are relevant to this discussion of memorialisation. Clarice Lispector’s short story ‘The Smallest Woman in the World’ (1960) includes a shocking, supposedly true narration of an incident in a Brazilian orphanage, where the girls “having no dolls to play with [...] concealed another girl’s death from the nun. They [...] played with the dead girl, giving her baths and little snacks, punishing her just so they could kiss her afterward, consoling her.”<sup>880</sup> In Lucky Mckee’s psychological horror film *May* (2002), a lonely child grows up with only one companion, a doll; when her porcelain friend is inadvertently shattered, the disturbed May opts to build a tribute to her utilising the body parts of acquaintances. In Charles Band’s teen horror film *Doll Graveyard* (2005) an abusive father tires of his daughter’s obsession with her dolls and orders her to bury them. The child follows her inanimate companions to the grave, only to rise with them a century later. In James Wan’s supernatural horror film *Dead Silence* (2007) a young widower returns to his hometown determined to understand his wife’s brutal murder and uncover the connected historic mystery of Mary Shaw, and the wooden figures that pay tribute to her children’s untimely deaths. Jeremy Bates’ novel *Island of the Dolls* (2016) embellishes the folklore and history

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<sup>875</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>876</sup> A. V. Seaton, “Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2:4 (1996): 234.

<sup>877</sup> Thomas Blom, “Morbid Tourism: A Postmodern Market Niche with an Example From Althorp,” *Norwegian Journal of Geography*, 54:1 (2000): 29.

<sup>878</sup> Graham Dann, “Tourism: The Nostalgia Industry of the Future”, in *Global Tourism: The Next Decade*, ed. William F. Theboald (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1994), 61.

<sup>879</sup> Philip Stone, “A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Toward a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions,” *Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal*, 54:2 (2006): 146.

<sup>880</sup> Clarice Lispector, *Family Ties*, (New York: New Directions, 2015), 168.

surrounding Isla de las Muñecas, transplanting an unknown killer onto this already eerie island. In Al Lougher's horror short *The Dollmaker* (2017) a couple, devastated by grief pay a visit to an anaesthetist who promises to recreate their lost child, but at a price. The field is, it seems, positively rife with macabre dolls, and as this brief overview demonstrates many of these narratives engage, either implicitly or explicitly, with the concept of memorialisation.

The Gothic and death are inescapably allied, “the obsession of the Gothic with death” part of an ongoing and well-established tradition that, as David Punter and Glennis Byron jest “perhaps [...] needs no elaboration.”<sup>881</sup> Indeed, as Carol Margaret Davison notes “Gothicists readily identify death as one of the foremost terrors at the heart of their cultural field of study,”<sup>882</sup> yet despite the genre's inherent preoccupation with death, scholarly research on the topic is scarce.<sup>883</sup> In her introduction to the pioneering edited volume *The Gothic and Death*, Davison concludes that “an overview of the existing critical literature reveals a dearth of scholarship that engages with the subject of death in the Gothic. Death has been, to date, only tangentially referenced, ‘discussed’ by implication, and minimally theorised in association with the Gothic.”<sup>884</sup> In response to this, this chapter explicitly engages with the theme of death as it demonstrates how memorialisation, horror, and the ‘living’ doll figure are interlinked, with examples populating literature, film, and television. It explores the notion of doll as memorial object through close examination of three horror narratives: Ramsey Campbell's *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* (1976), Charlie Brooker's ‘Be Right Back’ (2013), and William Brent Bell's *The Boy* (2016). In each of these texts the doll figure is utilised as a macabre form of memorialisation, the (in)human qualities of

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<sup>881</sup> David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 286.

<sup>882</sup> Carol Margaret Davison, “The Corpse in the Closet: The Gothic, Death, and Modernity”, in *The Gothic and Death*, ed. Carol Margaret Davison (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>883</sup> Davison identifies “the stellar, pioneering work of Elisabeth Bronfen and Barabara Creed on the abject female body/corpse, and insightful studies by Angela Wright and Dale Townshend devoted to the role of mourning in the works of Ann Radcliffe” as noteworthy exceptions. - Ibid.

<sup>884</sup> Davison, “The Corpse in the Closet,” 1.

these artificial figures are distorted with unnerving effect as boundaries between the natural and unnatural become blurred.

### **Buried Horrors: Ramsey Campbell's *The Doll Who Ate His Mother***

Ramsey Campbell's 1976 novel *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* gained a ringing endorsement from Stephen King in his influential 1981 study of horror, terror, and the supernatural *Danse Macabre*. This validation from one of the genre's greats brought Campbell swiftly to the attention of an American audience. In *Danse Macabre* King affirms that Campbell's writing is "strange; so uniquely Campbell that it might as well be trademarked," and he declares that "good horror *writers* are quite rare [...] and Campbell is better than just good."<sup>885</sup> Reflecting on Campbell's first foray into novel writing, King affirmed that he "succeeded in forging something uniquely his own in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*."<sup>886</sup> Indeed, it is this very something, this distinctive, macabre, and skilful style of prose, present in Campbell's earliest work and running right through his vast oeuvre, that mark out his work as worthy of further analysis.

Xavier Aldana Reyes in the introduction to his recent survey of the field *Horror: A Literary History* highlights some commonalities of the genre: "heavily intertextual and referential, often intentionally formulaic, horror texts can be easily identified by the enticing or daring messages that often address the potential reader from the lurid covers of books or from film posters. Horror, in short, tends to propose an entertaining and scary ride."<sup>887</sup> *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* is the embodiment of this, with a title ostensibly snatched from the front page of a tabloid newspaper and accompanying hauntingly lurid cover art. It is in the fine and continuing tradition of unflinchingly garish horror titles: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Driller Killer* (1979), *The Evil Dead* (1981), *Amateur Porn Star Killer* (2006), *Slaughtered Vomit Dolls* (2006), *Drag Me To Hell* (2009), *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), *Hobo with a Shotgun* (2011). These are

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<sup>885</sup> Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Warner Books, 1993), 397.

<sup>886</sup> *Ibid*, 403.

<sup>887</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes, "Introduction: What, Why and When is Horror Fiction", in *Horror: A Literary History*, ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes (London: The British Library, 2016), 8.

titles without ambiguity or allusion, that as Grady Hendrix concludes “scream like headlines.”<sup>888</sup> Titles befitting for a genre marketed on its specific ability to induce fear or disgust.

In *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* monstrosity is multifaceted, subject to constant change, and the source of imminent threat. The novel’s protagonist, Chris Kelly, is a merciless cannibalistic killer who masquerades as the victimised Chris Barrow, and it is this dual persona that ultimately enables him to manipulate others so successfully. He is the metaphorical doll of the novel’s lurid title, both a literal and figurative abhuman double.<sup>889</sup> Chris’s body aligns with Kelly Hurley’s classification of the abhuman body as “admixed, fluctuating, abominable.”<sup>890</sup> Such a being, Hurley affirms, “retains vestiges of its human identity, but has already become, or is in the process of becoming, some half-human other [...] simply ‘unspeakable’ in its gross, changeful corporeality.”<sup>891</sup> From his inception, he is marked as “the maggot inside her. The Devil’s child.”<sup>892</sup> Born with a full set of teeth, he ate his way out of his mother’s womb, ripping her open from the inside, this violent act resulting in her inevitable death. Chris’s monstrosity is conclusively tied to his parentage; his mother was a member of a satanic cult, whose leader, John Strong, controlled his followers through what they believed to be voodoo doll magic, magic that resulted in abortion, disfigurement, and ultimately murder. John’s black magic is powerful, allowing him to manipulate those around him at will, utilising voodoo figures with horrific effect. One such victim of this macabre sorcery is “not alive. Moving [...] The witch-doctor could make that happen, with his model [...] It would crawl out of wherever it was and come back to her. She’d been dreaming she’d found it writhing along the hall, covered with earth.”<sup>893</sup> These uncanny figures are not merely monstrous weapons, they are also visually grotesque, for they “looked as if the artist had hated

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<sup>888</sup> Grady Hendrix, *Paperbacks from Hell: The Twisted History of ‘70s and ‘80s Horror Fiction* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2017), 122.

<sup>889</sup> For Kelly Hurley’s definition of the term ‘abhuman’ see introduction.

<sup>890</sup> Kelly Hurley, “British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190.

<sup>891</sup> Ibid.

<sup>892</sup> Ramsey Campbell, *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* (London: Arrow Books Limited, 1988), 188.

<sup>893</sup> Ibid, 166.



anything remotely human.”<sup>894</sup> As such, their innate monstrosity is overt, and immediately incites disgust in the reader.

Befitting its horror credentials, in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* the locus of this manifold monstrosity is a decrepit house, specifically a cellar, a space which Gaston Bachelard in his seminal work *The Poetics of Space* asserts “is less rapid and less clear [...] it is never *definitive*.”<sup>895</sup> It is a fittingly Gothic setting where “darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls.”<sup>896</sup> In a scene reminiscent of Lila Crane’s iconic encounter with Norman Bates’s ‘mother’ in Robert Bloch’s *Psycho* (1959), “the climax of the hunt takes place in the rotting cellar of a slum building marked for demolition.”<sup>897</sup> Here, King maintains, Campbell succeeded in creating “one of the dreamiest and most effective sequences in all of modern horror fiction” through “its surreal and nightmarish evocation of ancient evil” and through “the glimpses it gives us of ‘absolute power’.”<sup>898</sup> It is here at the site of Chris’s conception that the non/human monstrosities entwine, and where uncanny memorials to Chris, his mother, and John Strong surface as dolls resembling each of them are found amongst the dirt and decaying ruins. These memorials embody the “acute awareness of, and haunting by, the past”<sup>899</sup> that O’Sullivan identifies as a central tenet of Campbell’s writing. The uncanny potential of these (in)human doubles is only made apparent after, as John Jervis attests “the key distinctions that set in place the modern ontology of the real” have been internalised, those “distinctions between living/dead, organic/inorganic, natural/artificial.”<sup>900</sup>

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<sup>894</sup> Ibid, 261.

<sup>895</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How we Experience Intimate Places*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 19.

<sup>896</sup> Ibid.

<sup>897</sup> King, *Danse Macabre*, 401.

<sup>898</sup> Ibid.

<sup>899</sup> Keith M. C. O’Sullivan, *Ramsey Campbell* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2023), 7.

<sup>900</sup> John Jervis, “Uncanny Presences”, in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, ed. Jo Collins and John Jervis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 19.

Much of the monstrosity that resides within Campbell's fiction emerges in seemingly mundane inner-city spaces. Hendrix credits Campbell with being "the chief practitioner of Fritz Leiber's style of urban horror" which entices readers "into empty city streets and squalid basements" threatening them "with the monsters that were born there."<sup>901</sup> Within *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* John Strong's inhuman doppelgänger is the first to be uncovered in such a space:

She couldn't touch it. She shook the spade gently, so that the mound fell away from the figure. Earth crumbled from the head. In the torchlight she saw the tiny perfect face, smiling contemptuously up at her. The first time she had turned up the face she'd known it was John Strong. He was naked: pale grey, and smooth as an infant [...] He lay smiling up from the spadeful of earth. Had he needed to bury this doll to preserve himself?<sup>902</sup>

This macabre form of memorialisation posits the doll as sacred, as John Strong's humanity, in essence his very self, is transferred from human body to lifeless object. Clare's response to this discovery is one of abject horror, "she hurled the doll away. It flew from the spade and broke on her torch. Clay limbs fell apart on the mud. The head landed upside-down, smiling. She shoved it further from her with her spade. Then she pulled the torch away from it, closer to her."<sup>903</sup> Unnervingly the doll's seemingly vacant face remains "smiling."<sup>904</sup>

The inhuman double of Chris's mother is:

A doll. A woman. Her face was large, the lips full. The woman was gazing down at herself in appalled panic [...] The face gazed down in immobilized panic [...] Clare scraped the

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<sup>901</sup> Hendrix, *Paperbacks from Hell*, 122.

<sup>902</sup> Campbell, *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*, 264.

<sup>903</sup> *Ibid*, 264-265.

<sup>904</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

earth from the rest of the doll. The woman was pregnant. Her belly swelled between her hands, which clawed at the earth. That was all. There was nothing more to see, only a small patch of earth stuck to the doll. But it was dragging Clare down to peer closer, to be certain. It wasn't a patch. The earth had collected in a hole in the belly of the doll: a mouth.<sup>905</sup>

Here the terror is tethered to a fixed stage of time, one defined by immobilising panic. It is a scene marked by notions of incorporation and cannibalism as the mouth, and the infant it belongs to is a miniature replica of Chris. Zygmunt Bauman in his pioneering sociological text *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* determines that death is the “most persistent and indifferent”<sup>906</sup> difficulty that humankind must face. Employing markedly Gothic rhetoric, Bauman deems death the “guilty secret [...] [and] skeleton in the cupboard left in the neat, orderly, functional and pleasing home modernity promised to build.”<sup>907</sup> In *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* Chris is persistently haunted by the deaths for which he is responsible, these memorialised figures the embodiment of his own hidden past and the skeletons that inhabit it.

Hendrix suggests that a trademark of Campbell's fiction is his ability to describe the familiar “in ways that make it seem alien and threatening”<sup>908</sup> and thus innately uncanny. Within his fiction, living beings frequently “behave like automatons” and inanimate objects persistently “sprout and grow as if alive.”<sup>909</sup> In *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* Chris confirms to this pattern. The discovery of his own monstrous doppelgänger is inherently uncanny:

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<sup>905</sup> Ibid, 266.

<sup>906</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 134.

<sup>907</sup> Ibid.

<sup>908</sup> Hendrix, *Paperbacks from Hell*, 123.

<sup>909</sup> Ibid.

At the bottom he could see a doll. It was a woman with a swollen belly. A mouth was emerging from the belly. At once he knew it was him in his mother. He couldn't keep his balance on the edge. He was falling toward the doll. He managed to take most of the fall on his left foot, but his right came down on the doll. Beneath his weight he felt the doll sink into the earth. It was taking him down with it. It was dragging him down into his dream, to lie beneath the earth."<sup>910</sup>

S. T. Joshi discerns that the weird is most often employed by Campbell "as a vehicle for the examination of a wide array of psychological states and the probing of an individual's relationship with others or with his or her own environment."<sup>911</sup> In *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* the weird is most apparent in this scene in which the protagonist is confronted by both the violence of his past and instability of his present. Here, the manifold versions of Chris threaten to merge into a singular, enduring, macabre memorial. The discovery of these dolls, memorials to both his mother's death and his violent birth, is key in uncovering the truths of Chris' past, yet the destruction of these previously hidden relics destroys their potential as evidentiary artefacts. This encounter with his younger double, one whose entrance into the world is defined by this destructive act and his mother's subsequent death, results in a partial loss of self as he smashes his uncanny 'other' to pieces. This haunting image of Chris staring at the resulting "grey fragments around his feet [...] [where] he'd broken himself in pieces,"<sup>912</sup> disturbingly parallels the disassembled bodies of his victims, whose limbs he is said to have stolen and whose corpses he "half devoured."<sup>913</sup> In *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* the cannibalistic killer denies those he consumed the right of memorialisation, and obliterates the memorials that evoke his own disturbing past.

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<sup>910</sup> Campbell, *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*, 270.

<sup>911</sup> S. T. Joshi, "Ramsey Campbell: Alone with a Master", in *Classics and Contemporaries: Some Notes on Horror Fiction*, ed. S. T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2009), 110.

<sup>912</sup> Campbell, *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*, 270.

<sup>913</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

## Reanimating the Digital (Un)Dead: Charlie Brooker's 'Be Right Back'

Charlie Brooker's anthology television series *Black Mirror* has provoked strong viewer responses, from unease to distress,<sup>914</sup> since the award-winning series first premiered on Channel 4 in 2011. Renewed by Netflix in 2016, the show continues to act as a dark reflection of our technologically obsessed contemporary society. Comprising of 27 episodes across six series, alongside one interactive film, *Bandersnatch*, *Black Mirror* presents an alternate present-day society which is, in many ways, uncannily like our own. The political theorist Langdon Winner in his persuasive study of contemporary technology-out-of-control, *Autonomous Technology*, observes that: "in the end, literally everything within human reach can or will be rebuilt, resynthesized, reconstructed, and incorporated into the system of technical instrumentality [...] 'technological society' is actually a subsystem of something much larger, the technological order."<sup>915</sup> *Black Mirror* illustrates exactly this; ostensibly concluding that technological advancement is tied to the subversion of traditional societal values. Agnieszka Kiejziewicz evaluates that each episode concludes with a warning, that "technology leads to the subversion of values and consolidates problems such as discrimination, addiction, mind control, and, widely perceived, destruction."<sup>916</sup> Each of the stand-alone episodes exist within what Jean Baudrillard defines as the 'hyperreal'; they are "sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital

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<sup>914</sup> Sam Wollaston highlighted the dystopian elements of the initial series, commenting: "Brooker has taken these things – not just the technology but the shallow values, the insincerity [...] the futility of so much of modern life – and woven it into an Orwellian nightmare for the 21st century [...] Again, it might not be very funny [...] But, hell, it's powerful." – Sam Wollaston, "TV Review: Black Mirror; Piers Morgan's Life Stories: Peter Andre; This is Justin Bieber," *The Guardian*, December 11, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/dec/11/review-charlie-brooker-black-mirror>. While William Thomas deemed *Black Mirror* "a disturbing parable that's more horrifying than amusing." – William Thomas, "Black Mirror Review," *Empire*, May 3, 2012, <https://www.empireonline.com/tv/reviews/black-mirror-review/>. Commenting on the most recent series, Rachel Dodes maintained that "time and time again, *Black Mirror* seduces us with its slick version of a counterfactual reality, with its ability to make us think." – Rachel Dodes, "Black Mirror Season 6: Every Episode, Reviewed," *Esquire*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a44215185/black-mirror-season-6-review/>.

<sup>915</sup> Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1978), 191.

<sup>916</sup> Agnieszka Kiejziewicz, "Between Technophobia and Futuristic Dreams: Visions Of the Possible Technological Development in *Black Mirror* and *Westworld* Series," *Maska* 2 (2017): 301.

recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.”<sup>917</sup> These episodes mould to a dystopian framework, offering the viewer differing, frequently disturbing, insights into the conceivable adverse effects of existing and future technologies.

Despite being commonly typecast as science fiction, *Black Mirror*'s Gothic credentials are readily apparent. As Rebecca Nicholson perceives “its world is taut and panicked, full of damaged and damaging people, and every corner promises dread and paranoia [...] it manages to take those familiar elements and craft them into something impossibly fearful, anxiety-inducing, and, above all, gripping.”<sup>918</sup> This Gothic aesthetic is also present in Brooker's earlier work, in 2008 he wrote the five-part horror *Dead Set*; which chronicles the impact of a zombie apocalypse on the contestants of a fictional reality television series, their *Big Brother* style house seemingly provides shelter from the encroaching undead. Ian Dawe detects Brooker's debt to “the English literary subconscious and the Gothic romance,”<sup>919</sup> whilst Jane Mulkerrins compares *Black Mirror*'s technological paranoia to the scientific suspicion of “Victorian Gothic horror.”<sup>920</sup> Brooker himself has been vocal about the impact of the genre on his work; he has cited anthology series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) as a key inspiration for *Black Mirror*,<sup>921</sup> and parallels can also be drawn between the series and Roald Dahl's *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979-1988) and Roy Skeggs' *Hammer House of Horror* (1980).

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<sup>917</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2-3.

<sup>918</sup> Rebecca Nicholson, “Black Mirror Review: The Netflix Series is Back – and Darker than Ever,” *The Guardian*, December 29, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/dec/29/black-mirror-review-netflix-series-back-darker-charlie-brooker>.

<sup>919</sup> Ian Dawe, “Black Mirror: The Best TV Show You're Not Watching,” *Sequart*, December 13, 2014, <http://sequart.org/magazine/53015/black-mirror-the-best-tv-youre-not-watching/>.

<sup>920</sup> Jane Mulkerrins, “Mr Charlie Brooker Talks Black Mirror Season Three,” *Mr Porter*, October 20, 2016, <https://www.mrporter.com/en-nl/journal/lifestyle/mr-charlie-brooker-talks-black-mirror-season-three-687848>.

<sup>921</sup> “We don't have that level of censorship anymore on television, so you can write about racism, or paranoia, of whatever you want straight off the bat. But it feels to me that if you want to address technology a way to do it is extrapolate it from where it is. That was what *The Twilight Zone* did: it would take things they were concerned about in the present moment and crank them up. It would present these irresistible, “What if ideas, and then play them out in a way that when it would hit the right height was really chilling.” – Ian Berriman, “Charlie Brooker Talks *The Twilight Zone* and Technology,” *SFX*, February 1, 2013, <https://www.gamesradar.com/charlie-brooker-talks-the-twilight-zone-and-technology/>.

Brooker has openly discouraged this sci-fi categorisation, stating that the show's production team "quite often draw on things that are in the ether and because [...] what we're doing is kind of speculative fiction more than it is sci-fi we end up [...] accidentally predicting things, which can be somewhat terrifying."<sup>922</sup> Indeed, from the portmanteau horror structure of 'Black Museum', through to Miley Cyrus' cover of Nine Inch Nails' discography in 'Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too', in *Black Mirror* the Gothic is everywhere. 'Metalhead' depicts – to quote Nicholson – "a mission to survive [...] the world's most stressful trip to Ikea [...] It is a breathlessly tense horror show that never relents for a second."<sup>923</sup> Similarly, 'Crocodile' and 'Shut Up and Dance' are underpinned with the sort of hopeless misanthropy central to Brooker's macabre style of storytelling. Pervasive, habitually creepy technology is frequently utilised in *Black Mirror* to horrific effect, and perhaps none so overtly as in 'Playtest' which showcases a new type of horror game, where tailored threats are generated from the player, Cooper's, deepest fears. As Bryan Bishop argues, 'Playtest' is:

First and foremost [...] a horror movie [...] once Cooper is stranded at a creepy old house for the game, Trachtenberg expertly works his camera (and audience expectations) to drop viewers right in the middle of Cooper's own personal nightmare. There are slow-burn creep-outs and perfectly timed jump scares, each a manifestation of some fear or trauma from Cooper's past. It's a Halloween roller coaster ride.<sup>924</sup>

'Be Right Back', the first episode of the second season of *Black Mirror*,<sup>925</sup> posits a future where a mourning widow can utilise her former partner's online persona, where data extracted

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<sup>922</sup> Tina Daheley, "Black Mirror: What Makes it Work?," June 11, 2019, in *Beyond Today*, produced by Philly Beaumont, Jaja Muhammad, and Lucy Hancock, podcast, MP3 audio, 25.34, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p07cv5qd>.

<sup>923</sup> Nicholson, "Black Mirror Review."

<sup>924</sup> Bryan Bishop, "Playtest is Black Mirror's Terrifying Glimpse at the Future of Gaming," The Verge, October 25, 2016, <https://www.theverge.com/2016/10/25/13401020/black-mirror-season-3-episode-2-playtest-recap>.

<sup>925</sup> 'Be Right Back' was written by Brooker and directed by Owen Harris.

from his social media accounts can fuel an artificial life-size copy, where “the more [information] it has, the more it’s him.”<sup>926</sup> ‘Be Right Back’ portrays the reconstruction of a lost love into an interactive digital archive consisting of public photos, videos, and social media posts. This archive is later ‘upgraded’ as the collection moves from a digital platform to a replica human body. A process of innovative memorialisation that begins as a means for Martha (Hayley Atwell) to cope with the anguish of losing her partner Ash (Domhall Gleeson) becomes an enduring, eerie memento of her loss. Martha tentatively conveys the news of her unexpected pregnancy to this digitally archived version of Ash in the hope that it will ease her grief. This virtual connection though soon becomes addictive, prompting Martha to ‘upgrade’ digital Ash to a biotechnical ‘living’ doll iteration. ‘Be Right Back’, as Neil Kirk observes, concludes “as the schism between the biotechnical Ash and her memories of the real Ash become increasingly clear, resulting in biotech Ash’s exile to the attic in the same fashion as the other maternal mementos of his family.”<sup>927</sup> In archetypal Gothic fashion Ash’s embodied avatar is thus “banished to the attic [...] where he/it manifests as a multiplicity of uncanny hauntings that disrupt the lives of Martha and their daughter.”<sup>928</sup> Martha’s decision to revive Ash produces several, persistently uncanny iterations of him, each post-death manifestation a ghostly replica of her lost love.

The software employed to revive Ash is disturbingly advanced. After being given the deceased’s name “it goes back and reads through all the things they’ve ever said online, their Facebook updates, their tweets, anything public,” with Ash’s name, “the system”<sup>929</sup> then does the rest. Yet as Kirk argues “this networked spectre is not static; it blurs public and private contexts

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<sup>926</sup> *Black Mirror*, season 2, episode 1, “Be Right Back,” written by Charlie Brooker, aired February 11, 2013, on Channel 4, Netflix.

<sup>927</sup> Neil Kirk, “‘I’m Not In That Thing You Know... I’m Remote. I’m In the Cloud’: Networked Spectrality in Charlie Brooker’s “Be Right Back””, in *The Gothic and Death*, ed. Carol Margaret Davison (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 222.

<sup>928</sup> *Ibid*, 219.

<sup>929</sup> *Black Mirror*, “Be Right Back.”



in a terrifying sort of inverted consumption”<sup>930</sup> for “the more it has, the more it’s him.”<sup>931</sup> Martha is frequently frustrated by the amount of time living Ash spends on his technological devices, pointedly commenting that “it’s a thief that thing” and mocking Ash for “vanishing down there”<sup>932</sup> into a social media vortex. Yet it is this very digital double, the by-product of Ash’s online addiction, that paves the way for the interactive, technologically constructed doppelgänger that follows. Martha is introduced to the service that allows her to communicate with Ash by a well-meaning friend: “I can sign you up to something that helps [...] it helped me [...] it will let you speak to him [...] I know he’s dead. But it wouldn’t work if he wasn’t. And don’t worry, it’s not some crazy spiritual thing.”<sup>933</sup> Hannah Priest locates the “(dis)integration of the human and the cybernetic”<sup>934</sup> as a central premise of *Black Mirror*; ‘Be Right Back’ showcases this through the turbulent relationship between human Martha and (un)dead Ash.

Martha is required to physically touch the device to commence conversations on this messenger-like platform. As Sarah Artt affirms, this “technology does not just ease mourning but tries to circumvent it altogether [...] Martha is permitted to side-step mourning by engaging with the digital recreation of Ash. She is allowed simply to continue speaking to him, acting as if he is still with her.”<sup>935</sup> Davison notes that within the Gothic tradition “persecutory, haunting ghosts” emerge due to “a failure or refusal to memorialise.”<sup>936</sup> The digitised ghost of Ash is a twenty-first century iteration of this established tradition. Contact between the pair soon progresses from written to spoken communication as Martha ‘upgrades’ Ash to more advanced software. During their first interaction of this type, Ash remarks that it’s “almost creepy [...] I say creepy, I mean

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<sup>930</sup> Kirk, “I’m Not In That Thing You Know,” 219.

<sup>931</sup> *Black Mirror*, “Be Right Back.”

<sup>932</sup> Ibid.

<sup>933</sup> Ibid.

<sup>934</sup> Hannah Priest, “Black Weddings and Black Mirrors: Gothic as Transgeneric Mode”, in *Transgothic in Literature and Culture*, ed. Jolene Zigarovich (New York: Routledge, 2018), 199.

<sup>935</sup> Sarah Artt, ““An Otherness That Cannot Be Sublimated” Shades of Frankenstein in *Penny Dreadful* and *Black Mirror*,” *Science Fiction Film and Television* 11:2 (Summer 2018): 272.

<sup>936</sup> Davison, “The Corpse in the Closet,” 7.

it's totally batshit crazy I can even talk to you. I mean I don't even have a mouth."<sup>937</sup> The fragility of this form of contact frightens Martha; after she accidentally breaks her phone the two temporarily lose contact, and this incident is the catalyst for her decision to upgrade Ash from technology-based mimic to artificially constructed replica. Ash's previous active social media presence provides the content for these exchanges, but it is Martha that ultimately takes the actions required to gift him 'life'. Persuaded by the prospect of being able to connect with a full body prototype of Ash, Martha purchases a life-size synthetic replica, immerses the double in water, and feeds it the appropriate nutrients. As Artt states, "Martha takes the voice and text-based electronic simulacrum that stands in for the dead Ash and purchases a body to house it, thereby giving the ghost its machine."<sup>938</sup> Her despair and desperation is, as Bradley Richards argues, the catalyst for "the Gothic preternatural creation moment in which Martha finally pushes the red button on her Ipad and channels the ones and zeros of life into Ashbot like a lightning strike."<sup>939</sup>

In 'Be Right Back' the digital double, despite, or indeed, because of, its uncanny aesthetic resemblance to Martha's former partner, is regarded with horror. Indeed, the viewer is frequently reminded of new Ash's lack of humanity; he doesn't eat, sleep, breathe, or bleed. Replica Ash is a substitute, lifelike but not actually living. Andrew Schopp locates Ash as "little more than a walking coffin, a repository to house a social media self that, in this case, remains stagnant, static, and incomplete."<sup>940</sup> In the episode's penultimate scene Martha leads Ash to a cliffside and orders him to jump, concluding that he's not 'enough', "you're just a few ripples of you. There's no history to you."<sup>941</sup> Martha, previously imprisoned by her grief, is now held by a prison "wrought by a

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<sup>937</sup> *Black Mirror*, "Be Right Back."

<sup>938</sup> Artt, "An Otherness That Cannot Be Sublimated," 269.

<sup>939</sup> Bradley Richards, "Be Right Back and Rejecting Tragedy: Would You Bring Back Your Deceased Loved One?," in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, ed. David Kyle Johnson (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2020), 41.

<sup>940</sup> Andrew Schopp, "Making Room for Our Personal Posthuman Prisons: *Black Mirror's* Be Right Back", in *Through the Black Mirror: Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age*, eds. Terence McSweeney and Stuart Joy (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 66.

<sup>941</sup> *Black Mirror*, "Be Right Back."

combination of cyborg intelligence and social media<sup>942</sup> and crucially, her own actions. Ultimately, Martha can neither embrace nor destroy this inadequate imitation, a ‘living’ memorial, “just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking”<sup>943</sup> who is fated to live out an uncanny legacy.

‘Be Right Back’ is an articulate illustration of the anxieties and fears encircling the unknown and unknowable experience of death, intermingled with anxieties and fears regarding the unknown and unknowable consequences of technological innovation. As Kirk argues, “reflected through Brooker’s *Black Mirror*, ‘Be Right Back’ offers a dark mediation on new media technologies encountering death.”<sup>944</sup> Here Brooker depicts a future in which the dead can rise again through revolutionary, problematic, and controversial technological innovations, and in doing so questions the repercussions of the ever-increasing visibility of the digital dead for contemporary society. In the tradition of Mary Shelley’s pivotal tale of creator and his creation *Frankenstein*, ‘Be Right Back’ is a doppelgänger narrative which skilfully articulates the permeable nature of human innovation and humanity in our modern age.

Brooker’s vision of housing an online database in a near-perfect human replica is a fiction, however the foundations of this technology are built upon reality. Today, fully digitised databases occupy every facet of our online interactions; networked information can be retrieved anywhere, across multiple devices, irrespective of geographical location; and online memorial pages are increasingly commonplace. The rapid innovations of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok increasingly permit users to persistently mediate their online identities, enabling, as Joana Rita Ramalho argues, “us to make dolls and puppets out of ourselves, exposing our ever-present

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<sup>942</sup> Schopp, “Making Room for Our Personal Posthuman Prisons,” 57.

<sup>943</sup> *Black Mirror*, “Be Right Back.”

<sup>944</sup> Kirk, “I’m Not In That ‘Thing You Know,” 229.

obsession with doppelgängers and fragmented or displaced identities.”<sup>945</sup> The result of which, she argues, “is a continual redrawing of the boundary between human, non-human, object, and thing, and our redefinition of the nature of life and agency, good and evil.”<sup>946</sup>

In 2017 Russian software developer Eugenia Kuyda constructed, from over 10,000 lines of online communication, a web-based application to allow her to communicate with a recently deceased friend. Meanwhile, internet users across the globe, using an AI chatbot named ‘Project December’, have communicated with deceased loved ones, or at least a digital replica of them. Utilizing an advanced version of the technology that Elon Musk and Sam Altman’s firm OpenAI created in 2019, a software they deemed “too dangerous”<sup>947</sup> for publication, programmer Jason Rohr’s creation eerily mimics human interaction as it seemingly imitates a person’s writing style and conversational idiosyncrasies. In 2018 a Swedish funeral home caused somewhat of a media furore when “it announced plans to use voice recognition software and virtual reality to create digital replacements of the dead to help people grieve.”<sup>948</sup> Their vision was “that when you are old and lonely because your spouse has passed away, you can put on your virtual reality goggles and go have breakfast with them. Of course, you know it’s not for real, but we see it more like a computer game really.”<sup>949</sup> Although still in the earliest stages of development, they are keen for developers to progress the project.

In June 2022, at its Re:MARS conference Amazon showcased a pioneering new Alexa update that enables the device to mimic the voice of a user’s dead relative. The promotional video

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<sup>945</sup> Joana Rita Ramalho, “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls: Reconfiguring Personhood through Object Vivification in Gothic Film,” *Studies in Gothic Fiction*, 6:2 (2020): 36.

<sup>946</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

<sup>947</sup> Karen Hao, “The Messy, Secretive Reality Behind OpenAI’s Bid to Save the World,” MIT Technology Review, February 17, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/02/17/844721/ai-openai-moonshot-elon-musk-sam-altman-greg-brockman-messy-secretive-reality/>.

<sup>948</sup> Bobby Hellard, “How an Episode of ‘Black Mirror’ Became a Creepy Reality,” I-D, November 13, 2018, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/nepbdg/black-mirror-artificial-intelligence-roman-mazurenko>.

<sup>949</sup> Ibid.

for this feature showed a grieving child asking Alexa to tell, in the voice of his late grandmother, a bedtime story. Rohit Prasad, Amazon’s head scientist of Alexa AI, when introducing the update stressed the increasing importance of giving AI systems human attributes, asserting that “while AI can’t eliminate that pain of loss, it can definitely make their memories last.”<sup>950</sup> Amazon are yet to reveal when this feature will be made public, “but says its systems can learn to imitate someone’s voice from just a single minute of recorded audio. In an age of abundant videos and voice notes, this means it’s well within the average consumer’s reach to clone the voices of loved ones — or anyone else they like.”<sup>951</sup> The use of synthetic voice mimicry software has become progressively more common in recent years, and was utilized to ghoulish effect in *Roadrunner*, a 2021 documentary film about chef Anthony Bourdain, who passed away in 2018.<sup>952</sup> Director Morgan Neville used AI technology to clone Bourdain’s voice, employing it to read from emails he had sent. Metaverse initiative Somnium Space is presently pioneering ways for users to communicate after death. The death of company founder, Artur Sychov’s father was the stimulus for an idea that resulted in the creation of its ‘Live Forever’ mode. A “forthcoming feature in Somnium Space that allows people to have their movements and conversations stored as data, then duplicated as an avatar that moves, talks, and sounds just like you—and can continue to do so long after you have died.”<sup>953</sup> For paying clients, Somnium Space will utilize data “to create an immortal mirror image of users with the same visual movements and manner of speech,”<sup>954</sup> a vision currently only fully realized in an exhaustive number of science fiction texts. Contemporary society’s practices of mourning and individual responses to the complexities of grief, have become problematized by

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<sup>950</sup> AWS Events, “Amazon re:MARS 2022 - Day 2 – Keynote,” YouTube, June 23, 2022, video, 1:02:24 to 1:02:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22cb24-sGhg>.

<sup>951</sup> James Vincent, “Amazon Shows Off Alexa Feature That Mimics the Voices of Your Dead Relatives,” The Verge, June 23, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2022/6/23/23179748/amazon-alexa-feature-mimic-voice-dead-relative-ai>.

<sup>952</sup> These simulations, often referred to as ‘audio deepfakes’ are now regularly employed in the development of podcasts, films, television series, and video games. Similar technology was used to posthumously incorporate Paul Walker into *Furious 7* (2015) and Carrie Fischer into *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019).

<sup>953</sup> Maxwell Strachan, “Metaverse Company to Offer Immortality Through ‘Live Forever’ Mode,” Vice, April 13, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkp47y/metaverse-company-to-offer-immortality-through-live-forever-mode>.

<sup>954</sup> Ibid.

these innovative, frequently dependent technologies. The ethical and moral real-world implications of such re-creations will, of course, only be fully discovered in time. The suggestion that these technologies hold the potential to circumvent the natural progression of death, and in turn of mourning, is a disconcerting one though. The renunciation of either could easily be perceived as unhealthy, while any adverse consequences of these technologies would be a sure tool for provoking public fears and/or confusion. Natasha Vita-More argues in her 'Extropic Art Manifesto' that "we are active participants in our own evolution from human to posthuman. We are shaping the image - the design and the essence - of what we are becoming."<sup>955</sup> Considering this, alongside contemporary society's stream of ostensibly unrelenting technological advancements, Martha's resurrection of her deceased lover in 'Be Right Back' is arguably, an unnerving near reality.

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<sup>955</sup> Natasha Vita More, "Extropic Art Manifesto," Extropic Art, January 1, 1997, <http://www.extropic-art.com/extropic.htm>.

## Eternalising Childhood and Its Toys: William Brent Bell's *The Boy*

In William Brent Bell's 2016 supernatural horror film *The Boy*, uptight American Greta (Lauren Cohan) relocates to the home of the elderly, eccentric Heelshires to care for their 'son' Brahms, a child-sized porcelain doll. The doll is an uncanny replica of the real Brahms, the Heelshires' late son, who died over twenty years ago in a housefire, yet is, Mr Heelshire (Jim Norton) insists, very much "still with us."<sup>956</sup> Director Brent Bell, whose previous genre work includes *Stay Alive* (2006), *The Devil Inside* (2012), and *Wer* (2013), drew inspiration from antique dolls, as well as iconic horror characters including "Damien from *The Omen* and characters like him [...] creepy little boys"<sup>957</sup> when creating the role of Brahms.

Despite reasonable box office takings, critical response to *The Boy* was largely unforgiving.<sup>958</sup> Mike McCahill deemed it an "intrinsically mediocre non-chiller" whose "mundane surroundings more recall Harry Hill than Chucky" concluding that after this, the killer doll subgenre evidently needs "new toys to play with."<sup>959</sup> Frank Scheck challenged Brent Bell's tendency to indulge in all too familiar horror tropes, concluding that "like its title character, the film only sporadically comes to life."<sup>960</sup> Joe Leydon credited the lead actors "simply for maintaining straight faces while muddling through the absurdities of this tepid horror opus," concluding that "despite the assiduous grinding of plot mechanics [...] the movie never fully distracts its audience from the

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<sup>956</sup> *The Boy*, directed by William Brent Bell, performances by Lauren Cohan, Rupert Evans, James Russell, Jim Norton, and Diana Hardcastle (2016; Beverly Hills, CA: Lakeshore Entertainment), DVD.

<sup>957</sup> Stacey Layne Wilson, "Exclusive: William Brent Bell Talks Creating *The Boy*," Dread Central, May 10, 2016, <https://www.dreadcentral.com/news/165190/exclusive-william-brent-bell-talks-boy/>.

<sup>958</sup> *The Boy* grossed \$73,929,392 in box office takings worldwide – "The Boy," IMDB, accessed July 10, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt3882082/?ref=recent\\_view\\_1](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt3882082/?ref=recent_view_1).

<sup>959</sup> Mike McCahill, "The Boy review – gimmicky horror forsakes suspense for stock shocks," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/18/the-boy-review-william-brent-bell>.

<sup>960</sup> Frank Scheck, "The Boy: Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 22, 2016, [HTTPS://WWW.HOLLYWOODREPORTER.COM/MOVIES/MOVIE-REVIEWS/BOY-FILM-REVIEW-858336/](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/boy-film-review-858336/).

inherent silliness of its premise.”<sup>961</sup> In contrast Trace Thurman judged *The Boy* to be “one of the more successful entries in the evil doll subgenre.”<sup>962</sup>

Greta upon her arrival at the Heelshires’ imposing mansion remarks that “it’s like something out of a storybook, isn’t it?”<sup>963</sup> Their secluded residence is filled with antique furniture, historic artwork, and elaborately decorative artefacts, items which reflect the family’s established wealth, and amongst which a porcelain doll appears uncannily at home. A more contemporary choice of doll would undoubtedly seem incongruous against such a backdrop, moreover, this selection, as Chifen Lu observes, “expresses a nostalgia not only for an idealized childhood, but also for a certain set of European bourgeois values that are now an anachronism.”<sup>964</sup> In reality, the property resembles more the haunted houses of Gothic horror than of fairy tales, featuring the staple winding staircases, hidden passages, eerie corridors, and creaking floorboards. Nick Freeman theorises that haunted house narratives can be read as “fictions of historical collapse, in which distinctions between past and present are questioned, violated, or erased.”<sup>965</sup> In *The Boy* the figure of the doll is utilised as a mechanism to uncover past truths that have a haunting impact upon the present.

In this most Gothic of settings Brent Bell generates, as Leydon observes, “palpable suspense during atmospheric sequences in which Greta explores the nooks and crannies of Heelshire manor.”<sup>966</sup> This eerie impression is furthered through closeup shots of seemingly sinister dolls and mounted taxidermy heads. After spending a night alone in the house Greta reflects on

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<sup>961</sup> Joe Leydon, “Film Review: ‘The Boy,’” *Variety*, January 21, 2016, <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/the-boy-review-1201685160/>.

<sup>962</sup> Trace Thurman, “[Review] ‘The Boy’ Manages to Entertain Despite its Silly Premise,” *Bloody Disgusting*, January 22, 2016, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/reviews/3377461/review-the-boy-2016/>.

<sup>963</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

<sup>964</sup> Chifen Lu, “Uncanny Dolls and Bad Children in Contemporary Gothic Narratives,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 45:2 (September 2019): 215.

<sup>965</sup> Nick Freeman, “Haunted Houses”, in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, eds. Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (London: Routledge, 2018), 328.

<sup>966</sup> Leydon, “Film Review.”



the disconcerting setup, “this whole thing is just creepy. A large house in the middle of nowhere. No neighbours. The windows don’t even open. No cell service.”<sup>967</sup> Here, Brent Bell pays tribute to horror’s propensity for placing isolated young women in ‘haunted’ houses and in doing so acknowledges the sinister consequences that those well versed in horror history will evidently expect from such a situation.<sup>968</sup> A subgenre within the field that is particularly reliant upon such a setup is home invasion horror.<sup>969</sup> Michael Fiddler argues that this subgenre “provides an uncanny blurring of the dream/nightmare and actuality<sup>970</sup> as these films’ setting “is in the bricks and mortar of homes that dream [...] Their characters are similarly villains who disrupt the ‘real’. Theirs is a brutal irruption of one world to the other, curdling, shifting and altering structures of meaning.”<sup>971</sup> Here the unknown attacker infiltrates the protective sphere of the home with the intent purpose of harming its inhabitants. These films, as Hayley Smith notes, not only “draw attention to a collective fear, but [...] additionally visualise the violation of a setting considered to be ‘sacred’.”<sup>972</sup> With *The Boy* Brent Bell subverts this convention, instead of considering the threat posed by a nameless external terror, he selects instead an internal threat, specifically an entity that already appears uncannily at home within the domestic sphere, the doll.

As Peter Nagy notes at the start of *The Boy* “we assume that we are in for a ghost-child or possessed-doll film, or some blend of the two. And *The Boy* plays on this assumption. The Heelshires act like grief-stricken parents who channel their pain into displaced affection. They treat the Brahms doll like a living child.”<sup>973</sup> At their first meeting Greta is warned that “Brahms is not

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<sup>967</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

<sup>968</sup> As seen in Jack Clayton’s gothic psychological horror *The Innocents* (1961), Alejandro Amenábar’s supernatural horror *The Others* (2001), and Guillermo del Toro’s gothic romance *Crimson Peak* (2015), amongst others.

<sup>969</sup> Notable examples of the subgenre include David Fincher’s *Panic Room* (2002), Bryan Bertino’s *The Strangers* (2008), and Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019).

<sup>970</sup> Michael Fiddler, “Playing *Funny Games* in *The Last House on the Left*: The uncanny and the ‘home invasion’ genre,” *Crime, Media, Culture*, 9:3 (December 2013), 286-287.

<sup>971</sup> *Ibid*, 287.

<sup>972</sup> Hayley Smith, “‘It’s not Safe in this House’: Supernatural Disguises and Intimate Partner Violence in *The Boy* and *The Invisible Man*,” *The Postgraduate Journal of Medical Humanities*, (2021), 155.

<sup>973</sup> Peter Nagy, “Boyism: The Horror of Delayed Manhood in William Brent Bell’s *The Boy* (2016),” *Horror Homeroom*, December 27, 2016, <https://www.horrorhomeroom.com/delayed-manhood-the-boy/>.

like other children. He can be... particular,” and Mr Heelshire expresses his wish that he had enough time to explain “the vicissitudes of a child as unique as our Brahms.”<sup>974</sup> On occasion the doll is gently scolded by Mrs Heelshire (Diana Hardcastle), “Oh, Brahms! You must sit up straight,” or praised for good behaviour, “Mommy’s so proud of you.”<sup>975</sup> The inexplicably ordinary way in which these grief-stricken parents engage with their porcelain ‘son’ is unnerving from the outset. Granville Stanley Hall and Alexander Caswell Ellis’ concept of “dollifying”<sup>976</sup> is relevant here. They propose that the process of ‘dollifying’ involves “ascribing more or less psychic qualities to the object and treating it as if it were an animate and sentient thing.”<sup>977</sup> Whilst this is a fundamental part of childhood play, the slippage of this behaviour into adulthood may prompt concern, as illustrated in *The Boy*. More broadly speaking, as Ramalho observes, in Gothic narratives that “share a vivid interest in issues pertaining to the frontiers between sanity and insanity,” the act of dollifying “generally has deeper implications and is used to reveal underlying psychological issues that affect adult characters.”<sup>978</sup> A clear illustration of this behaviour is seen in André De Toth’s period horror film *House of Wax* (1953) where the fanatical Professor stresses the sentience of his synthetic figures “to you they are wax, but to me their creator, they live and breathe.”<sup>979</sup> Here, the Professor, akin to the Heelshires, is participating in the act of dollifying. Those not fully partaking in such behaviour, however, may inevitably question the lucidity of those who do and thus their ability to discern the real from the fantastical.

Greta is told that she must adhere strictly to a list of rules which include a daily schedule of preparing meals, overseeing school lessons, reading bedtime stories to the doll, and giving it goodnight kisses. The consequence of breaking this is explicit from the film’s tagline “follow his

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<sup>974</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

<sup>975</sup> Ibid.

<sup>976</sup> Granville Stanley Hall and Alexander Caswell Ellis, *A Study of Dolls* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2009), 11.

<sup>977</sup> Granville Stanley Hall and Alexander Caswell Ellis, “A Study of Dolls,” *Pedagogical Seminary*, 4:2 (December 1896): 132.

<sup>978</sup> Ramalho, “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls,” 35.

<sup>979</sup> *House of Wax*, directed by André De Toth, performances by Vincent Price, Frank Lovejoy, Phyllis Kirk, and Carolyn Jones (2003; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros), DVD.

rules.”<sup>980</sup> It is critical that she doesn’t cover the doll’s face, take it outside of the house, or leave it alone. After the Heelshires’ departure, Greta, dismissing these rules as merely a coping mechanism for the distraught parents, promptly ignores their warning. Unsettling events swiftly follow: Greta’s belongings begin to disappear, she awakens one morning to find that a lock of her hair had been cut, she sees the shady outline of a figure behind her in the mirror, she hears the sound of a child wailing in the night, she receives phone calls in which she hears a child’s voice underneath static, and she is trapped in the Heelshires’ attic overnight after the stairs eerily compact ostensibly of their own accord. Most chilling of all, the doll appears to be alive. Greta finds Brahms in incomprehensible situations, and it seemingly moves whenever her back is turned. Greta’s fear here is a consequence of suspected, not witnessed, animation. In this instance then, as Ramalho discerns, “the Gothic uncanny is not dependent on vivification, but on its possibility.”<sup>981</sup> This uncanniness stemming from Greta’s, and thus the audiences’ belief that Brahms conceivably possesses agency, the fear stemming from the threat of this looming animation.

Determined to confirm the doll’s sentience, or else be forced to confront her own unstable mental state, Greta endeavours to prove to delivery man Malcolm (Rupert Evans) that the doll can in fact move unaided. She concludes that this doppelgänger is alive, haunted by the ghost of the former Brahms. This haunting is no coincidence, “as a victim of domestic abuse who miscarried after her ex-boyfriend, Cole, hit her, Greta sees Brahms, the ghost-child who has possessed a doll, as her own dead child.”<sup>982</sup> As Douglas Keeseey notes due to this unresolved grief Greta feels that Brahms somehow “has a claim on her that she is still obligated to nurture this lifeless ‘child’,”<sup>983</sup> and in the process reclaim her lost motherhood. Cole (Ben Robson) turns up suddenly at the house, intent on asserting his ownership of Greta and bringing her home. When introduced to

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<sup>980</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

<sup>981</sup> Ramalho, “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls,” 32.

<sup>982</sup> Nagy, “Boyism: The Horror of Delayed Manhood.”

<sup>983</sup> Douglas Keeseey, *Twenty First Century Horror Films: A Guide to the Best Contemporary Horror* (Harpenden: Kamera Books, 2017), 34.

Brahms his reaction is one of disbelief, “this is a joke right? The real boy’s gonna come running out any second” to which Greta affirms that “there isn’t a boy. They paid me to look after a doll.”<sup>984</sup> Greta asks Brahms for his help in freeing her from Cole and shortly after the words “Get Out” appear in bloodied scrawl, after playing by Brahms’ rules Greta can now ostensibly solicit the supernatural to shield her. Greta’s refusal to join Cole results in him smashing Brahms’ porcelain copy to pieces.

Yet, it is not, as Nagy asserts, “the dead child, the loss of the umbilical mother-child bond, that haunts the house. It is the undead “child,” one who refuses to cut the cord.”<sup>985</sup> In *The Boy*’s penultimate scene the real Brahms (James Russell) reveals himself. The Heelshires’ home erupts in a cacophony of broken plasterboard and shattered glass and from this chaos the adult Brahms emerges wearing a doll-like mask. This Brahms has been living within the walls since his apparent death decades before, venturing out from this hiding place to manipulate his porcelain double, projecting his own voice, yet crucially, remaining hidden. The two iterations of Brahms are thus inexorably linked, the porcelain doll and phantom child composing, as Lu discerns, “a bizarre body-and-soul synthesis.”<sup>986</sup> This revelation exposing that “the invisible, quasi-supernatural and hostile spectre haunting the house is [...] [in fact] the child himself.”<sup>987</sup> This uncanny doppelgänger is, as Keesey contends, “the eerie embodiment of both Greta’s fears: her still weirdly animate dead child and her possessive and domineering ex-lover.”<sup>988</sup> The adult Brahms has, in his porcelain doppelgänger, fashioned an idealised version of himself, one that projects an angelic innocence and who holds sway over the entire household.

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<sup>984</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

<sup>985</sup> Nagy, “Boyism: The Horror of Delayed Manhood.”

<sup>986</sup> Lu, “Uncanny Dolls and Bad Children,” 201.

<sup>987</sup> Ibid.

<sup>988</sup> Keesey, *Twenty First Century Horror Films*, 34.

Upon attempting to flee from Brahms, Greta and Malcolm find themselves disoriented within the labyrinthine corridors that lie within the walls of the Heelshires' mansion. Here they discover Brahms' secret chamber and find, upon his bed, a cloth doll he has disconcertingly crafted in Greta's image. The doppelgänger is dressed in her clothing and wearing a hairdo akin to her own. Horrified, Greta finally acknowledges the extent of Brahms' surveillance of her, "[he has] been watching me this whole time."<sup>989</sup> As Smith observes this timely realisation thus "refutes the existence of an innocent and supernatural presence, and instead enables Greta to recognize Brahms's monstrous obsession with her."<sup>990</sup> After a fleeting psychopath-stalks-victim pursuit around the labyrinthine mansion and its misty grounds, *The Boy* concludes with Greta, fulfilling Brahms' desire to be treated as an innocent child, leading him to bed, and granting a goodnight kiss before sinking a screwdriver into his chest.

By exposing Brahms to be a fully-grown man rather than a diminutive doll, *The Boy* ultimately situates itself "in the genre of slasher horror. Images of taxidermy around the Heelshires' mansion evoke *Psycho* (1960), and Brahms's mask, hiding place, supernatural strength, and propensity for chasing his victims remind us of the slasher sons that Norman Bates inspired: Jason Voorhees, Leatherface, and Michael Myers."<sup>991</sup> Through the guise of needing to care for his artificial replica, Greta is 'gifted' to Brahms by his parents, their suicide note to their very real son reads: "we will not be back. The girl is yours now. She's yours to love and care for."<sup>992</sup> Despite being led to slaughter, Greta successfully escapes and thus adheres to Carol Clover's seminal definition of 'the final girl'; she is one who is "chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified [...] but she alone also finds

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<sup>989</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

<sup>990</sup> Smith, "It's not Safe in this House," 162.

<sup>991</sup> Nagy, "Boyism: The Horror of Delayed Manhood."

<sup>992</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

strength [...] to stay the killer.”<sup>993</sup> An apparent threat remains though, as well as sufficient material for a sequel,<sup>994</sup> as the film’s closing scene showcases a pair of disembodied hands reassembling Brahms’ porcelain face, Brahms seemingly anticipating the arrival of his next nanny.

In *The Boy* Brent Bell concurrently plays on, and subverts, the established traditions of ‘living’ doll cinematic narratives where frequently the dolls very presence, coupled with its eerie appearance, is sufficient to incite a visceral reaction, agency only intensifying the horror. Still, the viewer expects the Brahms doll to move, like Greta “we don’t know what we’re dealing with here, is it a ghost, a trapped spirit?”<sup>995</sup> Brahms is an ostensibly lost child seemingly (re)born as a porcelain doll and the real horror here lies in the unknown. Furthermore, despite showcasing a complex bond between child and doll, *The Boy* distances itself from other ‘living’ doll horror narratives, “by subverting the commonplace pattern according to which the possessed doll is the vicious victimizer, while the child is the innocent prey,”<sup>996</sup> as seen in both the *Child’s Play* and *Annabelle* films. In *The Boy* this doll is a ‘living’ memorial of sorts, an artificial replica of a very real child, but one who unlike the real Brahms is tied to a fixed point in time, unable to grow up.

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<sup>993</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 35.

<sup>994</sup> Which came in 2020 with Brent Bell’s sequel *Brahms: The Boy II*.

<sup>995</sup> Brent Bell, *The Boy*.

<sup>996</sup> Lu, “Uncanny Dolls and Bad Children,” 201.

## Conclusion

Stephen Neale in his remarks regarding the specifics of horror states that at its core the genre is not focused upon violence, but on “its conjunction with images and definitions of the monstrous. What defines its specificity with respect to the instances of order and disorder is their articulation across terms provided by categories and definitions of ‘the human’ and ‘the natural.’”<sup>997</sup> The memorialised dolls portrayed in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*, ‘Be Right Back’, and *The Boy* embody this monstrosity in its entirety; the threat becomes monstrous when the (in)human forces collide. In *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* the protagonist unearths a macabre memorial site that is a lasting reminder of his traumatic past, his destruction of this site however, and of the memorialised dolls that reside within it, rescinds their potential as historic relics. In ‘Be Right Back’ Brooker skilfully amalgamates humanity and technology against a backdrop of grief, modernising traditional methods of memorialisation to articulately convey, as Davison notes, “a digital undead presence that persists after death.”<sup>998</sup> In *The Boy* Brent Bell adeptly employs the motif of the memorialised doll as a metaphor; Brahm is the childlike artificial doppelgänger of a living breathing man, who expresses a macabre unwillingness to mature, and instead utilises the doll to stay frozen in time. Set against that most Gothic of backdrops, death, these memorialised dolls provoke fear in their human counterparts. In these narratives the doll figure functions as a memorial object, one that is inescapably linked to the past, yet has an unsettling, sometimes horrific, impact on the present.

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<sup>997</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 21.

<sup>998</sup> Davison, “The Corpse in the Closet,” 13.

## Chapter Four: Doll as Haunted Object

“There are horrors beyond life's edge that we do not suspect, and once in a while man's evil prying calls them just within our range.”<sup>999</sup>

### **H.P. Lovecraft, ‘The Thing on the Doorstep’**

In simple terms a haunted doll is a doll that is ostensibly haunted or possessed in some manner; they can be traced back to Ancient Egypt, occupy museums across the globe,<sup>1000</sup> and are now the lucrative showpiece of numerous online marketplaces.<sup>1001</sup> The insubstantiality of these figures however, is such that eBay currently upholds an ‘Intangible items policy’ which reiterates that “all listings and products on eBay.com must offer a physical, tangible item,” thus “spells or haunted items”<sup>1002</sup> are technically banned.<sup>1003</sup> The belief that spirits can occupy physical objects, as well as people, or places, is prevalent across the globe, and in many cultures, objects containing spirits are a mainstay of religious traditions.<sup>1004</sup> This study centres upon anglophone depictions of haunted dolls. For the most part Western attitudes regarding possessed objects are negative, when items are acknowledged “as containing spirits, the spirits are usually thought to be demonic,”<sup>1005</sup> which

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<sup>999</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, *Country Tales of Arkham, Massachusetts and Beyond* (Maryland: Wildside Press LLC, 2020), 627.

<sup>1000</sup> Alongside Annabelle, ostensibly haunted doll Robert, who is currently housed in Fort East Martello Museum in Key West, Florida, is perhaps the most notorious example of this.

<sup>1001</sup> Including Etsy, eBay, and Facebook marketplace. American sellers hold the primary share of the market. At last count over a thousand purportedly haunted dolls were currently listed on eBay by sellers based in the UK. Title listings for these dolls tend to stress their authenticity and activeness, with phrases such as “very active,” “negative energy,” and “powerful psychic,” regularly employed. Listings start at a few pounds and run into the thousands. – “Haunted Doll,” eBay, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.ebay.co.uk/sch/i.html?from=R40&nkw=haunted+doll&scat=0&I.H.PrefLoc=1&sop=15>.

<sup>1002</sup> “Intangible Items Policy,” eBay, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.ebay.com/help/policies/listing-policies/intangible-items-policy?id=5038>.

<sup>1003</sup> As are listings for “someone's soul” and “a ghost in a jar.” - Ibid.

<sup>1004</sup> Sara Dupplis provides an interesting overview of this: “in Polynesia, a supernatural force known as *mana* is thought to reside in special people and special objects, much like a spirit. In Japanese Shinto, gods and spirits (*kami*) are thought to reside within special objects such as swords, mirrors, or special “spirits houses” built for them. In the traditional religion of Congo basin, special objects called *nkisi* are thought to contain spirits. Other cultures believe that objects may become possessed by spirits of the dead, especially if the person was near the object at the moment of death. Finally, many cultures use objects to trap or control unwanted or demonic spirits.” - Sara Dupplis, “Possessed Objects”, in *Spirit Possession Around the World: Possession, Communion, and Demon Expulsion Across Cultures*, ed. Joseph P. Laycock (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 287.

<sup>1005</sup> Dupplis, “Possessed Objects,” 287.



is reflective of Judeo-Christian denunciation of idolatry. Idolatry, defined here, as “the action or practice of worshipping idols; veneration of any image or object representing or regarded as the embodiment of a god or divinity.”<sup>1006</sup> The terror at the heart of these eerie figures lies, as Daniel Tiffany concludes, in the uncanny “impression that the doll is at once sentient and inert, awake and asleep,”<sup>1007</sup> their supernatural animation frequently reliant upon demonic possession.

Paranormal investigator Jayne Harris draws a comparison between haunted houses and haunted objects, affirming that “in simple terms, if a building can hold residual or intelligent spiritual energy, then it makes sense for other objects to do the same.”<sup>1008</sup> Similarly, John Harker contends that “if we accept the possibility of haunted houses, or ghosts/spirits in general, it certainly makes sense that they – spirits – could take up residence in a Chatty Cathy or Ballerina Barbie.”<sup>1009</sup> Mike Driscoll in his book *Demons, Deliverance, Discernment: Separating Fact from Fiction about the Spirit World* takes an alternative stance arguing that “only people become possessed. When a demon is attached to or controlling a particular place, an object, or even animals, it is called infestation.”<sup>1010</sup> This sense of infestation is present in James Wan’s *The Conjuring* universe through the figure of Annabelle. This doll, a malevolent outside force, infests the domestic space it infiltrates, infecting its inhabitants, and contaminating the objects that surround them, making them hazardous to their possessors. Similarly, this infestation is not easily disposed of, it has a tendency to follow its host from place to place and/or shift to another susceptible body when the previous host is spent.

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<sup>1006</sup> “Idolatry, n.,” Oxford English Dictionary, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www-oed-com.hull.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/91099?redirectedFrom=idolatry>.

<sup>1007</sup> Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 77.

<sup>1008</sup> John Harker, *Demonic Dolls: True Tales of Terrible Toys* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 13.

<sup>1009</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1010</sup> Mike Driscoll, *Demons, Deliverance, and Discernment: Separating Fact from Fiction about the Spirit World* (El Cajon: Catholic Answers Press, 2020), 90.

Despite the abundance of anthologies that exist on the concept of haunting, ranging from Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert's *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*, to Bill Bowers' *Great American Ghost Stories*, and Robert Phillips' *Nightshade: 20th Century Ghost Stories*, as Nina Auerbach justly observes "serious scholarship on ghosts in fiction and film is [...] surprisingly sparse."<sup>1011</sup> Roger Clarke however suggests that academic interest in the field is slowly being renewed, "after ignoring the paranormal for decades, academia has found a new interest in ghost-belief and folklore, taking up where it left off one hundred and fifty years ago."<sup>1012</sup> Srdjan Smajić proposes that this lack of criticism "is no doubt due in part to the preference among literary scholars for realist fiction, which is to say the sort of writing that embraces the mandate to grapple with pressing social, economic, and political issues."<sup>1013</sup> Ghost stories instead, Karl Bell suggests, primarily assist in articulating "how certain places made people feel, the supernatural providing a useful vocabulary for otherness, the unsettled, the unseen and the unsolid."<sup>1014</sup> This lack of attention can also in part be ascribed to the intangible quality of a genre which Julia Briggs pronounces as "at once vast, amorphous, and notoriously difficult to define."<sup>1015</sup> She shrewdly avoids distinct classification, and instead utilises the term ghost story to "denote not only stories about ghosts, but about possession and demonic bargains, spirits other than those of the dead, including ghouls, vampires, werewolves, the 'swarths' of living men and the 'ghost-soul' or doppelgänger."<sup>1016</sup> It is the inclusion of the latter in this definition that is most pertinent here.

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<sup>1011</sup> Nina Auerbach, "Ghosts of Ghosts," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32 (2004): 278.

<sup>1012</sup> Roger Clarke, *A Natural History of Ghosts: 500 Years of Hunting for Proof* (London: Penguin, 2012), 17.

<sup>1013</sup> Srdjan Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>1014</sup> Karl Bell, "Phantasmal Cities: The Construction and Function of Haunted Landscapes in Victorian English Cities", in *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, ed. Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), 100.

<sup>1015</sup> Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), 7.

<sup>1016</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, haunted dolls are a mainstay of the “spirit-haunted universe of the Gothic, where matter ubiquitously and disturbingly becomes alive.”<sup>1017</sup> Equally, as Sara Duppils discerns, Western folklore “is replete with stories of possessed objects causing hauntings in homes where they are kept.”<sup>1018</sup> Within this fiction the “phenomena associated with possessed objects include apparitions, voices, raps, ‘sensing a presence,’ objects ending up in unexpected places [...] and physical sensations (pushes, pinches, scratching, etc).”<sup>1019</sup> These fictional dolls as June Michele Pulliam notes, are often described as being “possessed by malign, nonhuman entities or earthbound spirits,” spirits that are either “children who died as a result of a horrific accident” or “women who are the victims of domestic violence.”<sup>1020</sup> Irrespective of cause owners are encouraged to treat the dolls with caution.<sup>1021</sup> Yet as Susan Yi Sencindiver observes, “in the case of Gothic fantastic fiction, the reader is arguably less agitated by a vicarious concern for the plight of characters than by the apprehension aroused by the suspicion of a doll’s furtive inner life.”<sup>1022</sup> This eerie notion of a doll’s “furtive inner life” appears to be a fruitful source of macabre inspiration for writers and directors of horror alike.

The following examination of select texts provides an overview of the type of doll-centric narratives that are applicable to this discussion of the concept of haunting. The protagonist of Mercè Rodoreda’s short story ‘The Dolls’ Room’ (1984), trapped amidst hundreds of otherworldly dolls and seeking to reassure his distressed companion of their innocuousness, questions “what

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<sup>1017</sup> Susan Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll’s Uncanny Soul”, in *The Gothic and the Everyday: Living Gothic*, ed. Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105-106.

<sup>1018</sup> Duppils, “Possessed Objects,” 287.

<sup>1019</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1020</sup> June Michele Pulliam, “Dolls”, in *Ghosts in Popular Culture and Legend*, ed. June Michele Pulliam and Anthony J. Fonseca (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2016), 83.

<sup>1021</sup> Harker offers some advice on what to do should encounter you encounter your own ‘demon’ doll: “What should you do if you suspect you’ve got a haunted doll on your hands? First, don’t panic [...] You may have a problem with a pesky spirit, or even a worst-case scenario of a demon-infested doll, but there is always help available. Contact your spiritual advisor. Reach out to a reputable paranormal investigator. Remain positive [...] Don’t attempt your own ‘exorcism,’ as this could just make things worse [...] You can also try disposing of the doll. Burying it or weighing it down and tossing it in deep or running water can often remedy the situation.” - Harker, *Demonic Dolls*, 15.

<sup>1022</sup> Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll’s Uncanny Soul,” 104.

harm can they do, with pasteboard and porcelain heads, bones made of perforated iron, wooden legs and bellies full of sawdust?”<sup>1023</sup> Pulliam highlights the trend for haunted dolls in both children’s and young adult fiction, identifying as notable texts in the field “Garth Nix’s [...] [fantasy novel] *The Ragnwitch* (1990), about a malign entity that possesses a rag doll; Holly Black’s [...] Newbery Award-winning [...] [speculative novel] *Doll Bones* (2013), about a doll haunted by the ghost of a girl; and William Sleator’s [...] [horror novella] *Among the Dolls* (1975), where a girl who had taken out her frustrations with life on the dolls inside of her dollhouse, wakes up to discover that she is trapped in the house with them and that her thoughts have animated them into monsters.”<sup>1024</sup> Haunted dolls likewise make worthy subjects for short story anthologies with Seon Manly and Gogo Lewis’s *The Haunted Dolls* (1980) comprising of tales by Agatha Christie, M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others. More recently when approaching authors to contribute to her anthology *The Doll Collection* (2016), editor Ellen Datlow “made one condition: no evil doll stories” and instead encouraged authors to seek the “horror and darkness to be found in the world of dolls beyond that well-trodden path.”<sup>1025</sup> The resulting collection showcases the myriad of potential horrors stemming from these eerie doppelgängers.

The tagline of Daniel Ray’s horror movie *Heidi* (2004) avows that the titular haunted doll will ensure that “playtime’s over”<sup>1026</sup> for a pair of unsuspecting friends. In Alexander Yellen’s thriller horror *Finders Keepers* (2014) single mother Alyson becomes increasingly concerned about the bond her adolescent daughter shares with an ominous doll that was seemingly abandoned by the former residents of their new home. Andrew Jones’ British horror film *Robert* (2015) and its four sequels loosely portray the lore surrounding notorious haunted doll Robert of Key West,

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<sup>1023</sup> Mercè Rodoreda, “The Dolls’ Room”, in *Doubles, Dummies and Dolls: 21 Terror Tales of Replication*, ed. Leonard Wolf (New York: Newmarket Press, 1995), 170.

<sup>1024</sup> Pulliam, “Dolls,” 84.

<sup>1025</sup> Ellen Datlow, “Introduction”, in *The Doll Collection*, ed. Ellen Datlow (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2015), 14.

<sup>1026</sup> *Heidi*, directed by Daniel Ray, performances by Samuel Brian, Joei Fulco, and Joseph Bell (2004; Venice, CA: Neon Mirage), DVD.

Florida.<sup>1027</sup> *Robert*,<sup>1028</sup> the most faithful tribute of the four, depicts the terrifying supernatural events that occur to the Otto family after their son Gene acquires a vintage doll. Upon her dismissal from the Otto household housekeeper Agatha gives Gene a parting gift, the antique doll Robert. Strange occurrences immediately follow for which Gene is insistent that Robert is to blame. Jones's *Robert* is disappointingly lacklustre though, any impending threat buried behind shaky camerawork; the tales which followed the original doll are surely more disturbing than anything present in this rather hollow revision. In a similar vein Michael Crum's modest horror film *Anna* (2017) details the horrors that ensue after one such haunted doll opens a gateway to hell, while Jamie Weston's low-budget horror *Mandy the Doll* (2018) positions a haunted doll as the singular source of all evil.

Perhaps inevitably, the haunted doll horror movie trope has also been subject to parody, 'The Ziff Who Came to Dinner' episode of animated series *The Simpsons* is an articulate example of this. In it, Homer takes both his and the neighbour's children to a local screening of horror movie *The Re-Deadening*, a parody of Maria Lease's slasher horror *Dolly Dearest* (1991). The film's maniacal star is a possessed killer doll named Baby Button-Eyes who, aesthetically, is an uncanny precursor to the eerie 'other' mother of Henry Selick's *Coraline* (2009). The doll's button eyes apparently taken "from the trousers of a psychotic killer."<sup>1029</sup> This psychotic influence spurs the doll to go on a murderous rampage and to provoke those around her to kill. The children are naturally frightened by the events playing out on screen. Homer's misguided attempt to comfort them pays homage to the supposedly true accounts behind many a haunted doll: "relax... stupid. Everything you see is make believe, although it is based on a true story some of which happened in this very theatre."<sup>1030</sup> His later attempt to comfort his daughter, "Oh honey don't be scared.

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<sup>1027</sup> The sequels to *Robert* (all directed by Jones) are: *The Curse of Robert the Doll* released on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, *The Toymaker* (also known as *Robert and The Toymaker*) released on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 2017, *The Revenge of Robert the Doll* released on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2018, and *Robert Reborn* released on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2019.

<sup>1028</sup> Also known as *Robert the Doll*.

<sup>1029</sup> *The Simpsons*, season 15, episode 14, "The Ziff Who Came to Dinner," written by Dan Castellana, aired March 14, 2004, on Fox, Disney+.

<sup>1030</sup> *Ibid*.

Look, they killed the evil doll [...] Well what do you know? Its Unkillable,”<sup>1031</sup> further highlights the established tradition of invincible dolls on screen, within which, Baby Button-Eyes consciously sits. As this concise overview shows many ‘living’ doll contemporary horror narratives, engage, either directly or indirectly, with the concept of haunting.

This chapter explores the ways in which the figure of the ‘living’ doll and concepts of haunting manifest in contemporary horror narratives. It focuses upon one, allegedly supernatural entity, Annabelle, and the narratives that stem from its ostensibly ‘demonic’ body. Specifically, it analyses the role it plays in *The Conjuring* universe. James Wan’s 2013 film *The Conjuring* was followed in 2014 by a spin-off *Annabelle*, directed by John R. Leonetti, which focused on the doll’s macabre origin story. A prequel, directed by David F. Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation* followed in 2017, and a sequel directed by Gary Dauberman, *Annabelle Comes Home* was released in 2019. Each of these narratives stem from paranormal legend purporting to be truth, as they pay tribute to real-life Raggedy Ann doll Annabelle. This chapter explores the folkloric and anthropological implications of purportedly haunted objects and determines the significance of the original Annabelle story to these subsequent adaptations. It examines how the cinematic Annabelle has outshone its real-life counterpart, forging a name and narrative that extends far beyond the walls of the Occult Museum in which it currently resides.

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<sup>1031</sup> Ibid.

## The Peculiar Tale of Annabelle the ‘Demon’ Doll

Lore states that Annabelle, a vintage Raggedy Ann doll, was gifted to Donna in 1970 by her mother for her 28<sup>th</sup> birthday. Shortly after receiving the doll, Donna and her flatmate Angie became aware of something rather peculiar: “after making her bed each morning, Donna would place the doll – legs straight out and arms to the sides – on her bed, but when she returned in the evening, the legs and arms would be positioned differently. The limbs would be crossed or the doll’s arms would be folded in its lap.”<sup>1032</sup> They claim that “it started moving *itself* to different locations in the apartment [...] [they] came home to find themselves greeted by the doll *kneeling* on a chair by the front door,”<sup>1033</sup> and allege to have witnessed on one occasion, Annabelle levitating. The doll also left them messages “written in pencil on parchment paper, of which they had neither in the house, they found messages pleading for help, “HELP US” and “HELP LOU” were scrawled in childlike handwriting across the yellowed paper.”<sup>1034</sup> After finding droplets of what appeared to be blood on the doll’s hands and chest, they contacted a medium for spiritual advice. The medium informed them that many years ago a girl named Annabelle Higgins had died on the property in suspect circumstances, and that this girl’s spirit wished to embody the doll and thus stay with them. Disconcertingly, they agreed, and from that point on the doll became known as Annabelle. After Annabelle’s actions became more violent - it is claimed it brutally attacked a house guest, leaving claw-like scratches on his chest - the case was referred to renowned demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren.

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<sup>1032</sup> Stacey Graham, *Haunted Stuff: Demonic Dolls, Screaming Skulls, and Other Creepy Collectibles* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2014), 38.

<sup>1033</sup> Harker, *Demonic Dolls*, 35.

<sup>1034</sup> Graham, *Haunted Stuff*, 38.

Robert David Chase defines ‘demonologists’ as people who devote their lives “to the study of the supernatural and the occult.”<sup>1035</sup> Regarding the Warrens, he suggests that “‘study’ is perhaps too passive a word, for it implies that the Warrens spent most of their time poring through dusty volumes filled with ancient and macabre lore. In fact, [...] [they] travelled worldwide, participating in every kind of supernatural activity, from watching violent phantoms hurl axes at living human beings, to assisting priests in the rites of exorcism.”<sup>1036</sup> Their paranormal work started from their homebase in Connecticut during the 1950s, and “it was their investigation into a murder allegedly connected to a haunted house in Long Island in 1975 that propelled them into the public eye.”<sup>1037</sup> Ed’s interest in this work stemmed from the paranormal phenomena he purportedly experienced as a child. His primary work was as a demonologist, while Lorraine utilized her apparent psychic powers as a trance medium. Often referred to as “America’s original ghost hunters,”<sup>1038</sup> the Warrens acted as leading figures in the believer community for many decades, investigating countless reports of paranormal,<sup>1039</sup> supernatural, and otherworldly activity of “haunted houses, demons, vampires, werewolves and [...] black witchcraft.”<sup>1040</sup> Noteworthy among these cases is the Amityville Horror account,<sup>1041</sup> which inspired Jay Anson’s novel *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* (1977) and countless subsequent film adaptations and spinoffs,<sup>1042</sup> and the Enfield poltergeist

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<sup>1035</sup> Robert David Chase, *Ghost Hunters: True Stories from the World’s Most Famous Demonologists* (Los Angeles: Graymalkin Media, 2014), 1.

<sup>1036</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1037</sup> John W. Morehead, “Warren, Ed and Lorraine”, in *Spirit Possession Around the World: Possession, Communion, and Demon Expulsion Across Cultures*, ed. Joseph P. Laycock (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 366.

<sup>1038</sup> J. W. Sawyer, *Deliver Us from Evil: True Cases of Haunted Houses and Demonic Attacks* (Canary Islands: OmniMedia Publishing, 2009), 148.

<sup>1039</sup> “Over the course of 50 years of research, the Warrens claim to have investigated over 10,000 cases.” - Morehead, “Warren, Ed and Lorraine,” 367. These tales of supernatural hauntings popularized by the Warrens have, over the years, directly or indirectly inspired numerous films, documentaries, and television series.

<sup>1040</sup> Sawyer, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 148.

<sup>1041</sup> In 1975 New York couple George and Kathy Lutz alleged that their house was haunted by a demonic presence, that was apparently so violent that they were forced to flee. The case was controversial, “Dr. Stephen Kaplan, a paranormal investigator from New York, examined the Lutz’s claims and concluded they had no basis in fact. The Warrens attempted to undermine Kaplan’s conclusions. In 1979 William Weber, lawyer for Ronald DeFeo, admitted his part in planning and creating a hoax with George Lutz [...] Weber’s motive was to rid himself of a mortgage he couldn’t afford. Jim and Barbara Cromarty later moved into the house and observed no unusual phenomena.” - S. T. Joshi, *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An Encyclopaedia of Our Worst Nightmares* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 274.

<sup>1042</sup> Including: Damiano Damiani’s *Amityville II: The Possession* (1982), Richard Fleischer’s *Amityville 3-D* (1983), Sandor Stern’s *Amityville Horror: The Evil Escapes* (1989), Tom Berry’s *The Amityville Curse* (1990), Tony Randel’s *Amityville: It’s About Time* (1992), John Murlowski’s *Amityville: A New Generation* (1993), Steve White’s *Amityville:*



account which inspired Kristoffer Nyholm's British drama horror series *The Enfield Haunting* (2015) and James Wan's supernatural horror film *The Conjuring 2* (2016).<sup>1043</sup> Alongside these investigations the Warrens wrote numerous books, delivered public lectures, taught courses on demonology, and in 1952 founded the New England Society for Psychic Research of which they both served as directors.

Unsurprisingly the Warrens' work prompted its fair share of scepticism alongside allegations of exploitation and fraud.<sup>1044</sup> Self-proclaimed science-based paranormal investigator Benjamin Radford claims that the Amityville case was "refuted by eyewitnesses, investigations, and forensic evidence."<sup>1045</sup> Steve Novella and Perry DeAngelis, members of the New England Skeptical Society denounced them "at best, as tellers of meaningless ghost stories, and at worst, dangerous frauds."<sup>1046</sup> Horror novelist Ray Garton, who was appointed to write a book chronicling the case of the Snedeker family whom the Warrens assisted in 1986 after ghostly apparitions invaded their home, questioned the legitimacy of the resulting publication, *In a Dark Place: The Story of a True Haunting* (1992): "I used what I could, made up the rest, and tried to make it as scary as I could."<sup>1047</sup> Ed's reaction to this cynicism was unwavering: "I will not turn my back on the victims of demonic

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*Dollhouse* (1996), Andrew Douglas' *The Amityville Horror* (2005), Geoff Meed's *The Amityville Haunting* (2011), Eric Walter's *My Amityville Horror* (2012), Andrew Jones' *The Amityville Asylum* (2013), John R. Walker's *The Amityville Playhouse* (2015), Mark Polonia's *Amityville Death House* (2015), Michael Angelo's *The Amityville Terror* (2016), Dustin Ferguson and Mike Johnson's *The Amityville Legacy* (2016), Henrique Couto's *Amityville: No Escape* (2016), Dylan Mars Greenberg's *Amityville: Vanishing Point* (2016), Dustin Ferguson's *Amityville: Evil Never Dies* (2017), Mark Polonia's *Amityville Exorcism* (2017), Franck Khalfour's *Amityville: The Awakening* (2017), Chuck and Karolina Morrongiello's *Amityville: Mt. Misery Rd* (2018), Daniel Farrands' *The Amityville Murders* (2018), Trey Murphy's *Amityville Cult* (2021), Billy Lewis' *Amityville: The Resurgence* (2022), JT Kris' *Ghosts of Amityville* (2022), and Eric Tessier's *The Amityville Curse* (2023).

<sup>1043</sup> Single parent Peggy Hodgson claimed to have witnessed ominous supernatural activity, centring around her two teenage daughters, in her London council house in 1979.

<sup>1044</sup> Despite not charging for their services there is a case to be made for them monetizing fear as they drew significant profits from books written about the cases they attended.

<sup>1045</sup> Benjamin Radford, "Was 'Amityville Horror' Based on a True Story?," Snopes, April 15, 2005, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-amityville-horror/>.

<sup>1046</sup> Mike Patrick, "Truth or Scare? Ghost Hunters' Stories Fail to Rattle Skeptics," *Connecticut Post* 6 (October 24, 1997): front page.

<sup>1047</sup> Daniel Hayes, "The Brutal Truth Behind 5 "Fictional" Horror Movies," *The Lineup*, April 24, 2017, <https://the-line-up.com/the-brutal-truth-behind-5-fictional-horror-movies>.

forces simply because a sceptical public is not yet ready to accept the supernatural.”<sup>1048</sup> He posed that “it is strange that although many cases of modern-day demonology have been proven, skeptics still scoff simply because they do not want to admit, even to themselves, that there are things in both heaven and earth which just cannot yet be explained with a slide rule.”<sup>1049</sup> Despite being largely self-taught, the Warrens believed themselves to be authorities on demonology, and judged their work to have both a religious and scientific foundation, which comprised of elements of Roman Catholic demonology, exorcism, “Protestant fundamentalist spiritual warfare theology and deliverance ministry” in addition to “elements from the paranormal, and “the occult” that often perpetuated stereotypes and conflation of witchcraft and Satanism.”<sup>1050</sup> Irrespective of the truth or lack thereof behind their accounts, to a willing public, the Warrens’ cases presented a convincing veneer of verisimilitude. Thus, the significance of these reported sightings lies not in their accountability, but in the relative notoriety the Warrens’ imparted upon them.

Regarding Annabelle the Warrens concluded that there was a spirit attached to the doll but dismissed the medium’s prior conclusion concerning Annabelle Higgins, suggesting instead that “it was something inhuman-demonic.”<sup>1051</sup> They insisted that this was not a simple possession for “demonic spirits don’t possess objects, they possess people. And eventually, that’s what the entity in their apartment hoped to do: possess one or all of them.”<sup>1052</sup> On the Warrens’ recommendation a priest was called to perform an exorcism. Lorraine’s clairvoyance concluded that this had been successful at banishing the demonic spirit from their home, but the flatmates remained frightened and requested that the Warrens’ removed Annabelle from the premises.

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<sup>1048</sup> Sawyer, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 23.

<sup>1049</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1050</sup> Morehead, “Warren, Ed and Lorraine,” 368.

<sup>1051</sup> Harker, *Demonic Dolls*, 39.

<sup>1052</sup> Ibid, 40.

Following this episode Annabelle was transplanted to The Occult Museum in Monroe, Connecticut where it remains imprisoned to this day.<sup>1053</sup> The museum houses a cornucopia of peculiar objects that the Warrens’ “aver to demonstrate the existence of the supernatural,”<sup>1054</sup> with many of the items having been collected by the Warrens during their travels and ghost hunting escapades. Annabelle, perhaps the most notorious of the museum’s inhabitants, resides alongside a profusion of other allegedly haunted relics, including: a possessed samurai suit; a piano that plays by itself; an accordion-playing toy monkey that is said to stalk and kill; satanic tools; demon masks; psychic photographs; the coffin of a modern day vampire; a brick from supposedly the most haunted house in England, Borley Rectory; a mirror that summons spirits; children’s tombstones that have been used as satanic alters; a cursed pearl necklace that is said to strangle those who wear it; a shadow doll that can enter people’s dreams and kill them; and human skulls which possess the ability to open the gateway between Hell and Earth.

Annabelle’s new home is located on the Warrens’ own property, where it is claimed this ‘demon’ doll is still very much active. Early on in its stay Ed reported that it “levitated several times but seemed to grow weary of that game fairly quickly when he didn’t show a reaction to it. After that it branched out and moved from room to room.”<sup>1055</sup> To stop Annabelle from travelling further afield the Warrens commissioned a glass display case specifically for it. Open to public viewings,<sup>1056</sup> the sign on Annabelle’s case reads: “Warning, Positively Do Not Open.” Lorraine appeared content with this situation, stating that “at least as it sits, we know where it resides. It isn’t out into the world causing harm to others. We have a Catholic priest who performs a binding

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<sup>1053</sup> On the 14th of August 2020, the doll’s Wikipedia page was anonymously updated to indicate that it was missing. The resulting public unease at this idea caused #Annabelle to trend on twitter. In response staff at the museum released an official statement disputing the hoax, stressing that the doll remained safely within the confines of the museum.

<sup>1054</sup> Pulliam, “Dolls,” 83.

<sup>1055</sup> Harker, *Demonic Dolls*, 41.

<sup>1056</sup> In March 2018 the museum temporarily closed its doors to the public, full closure followed in 2019 due to zoning violations. The current owners are said to be looking for a new, more suitable, location to reopen the business.

prayer around the doll which acts as a blockade.”<sup>1057</sup> Legend tells that Annabelle is purportedly responsible for the death of a young museum visitor who “taunted the doll by asking it to scratch him and banging on its case. Escorted from the museum [...] the visitor [...] left on his motorcycle for home. Not long after leaving the Occult Museum, the young man was the victim of an accident as his motorcycle ran off the road and hit a tree, killing him instantly.”<sup>1058</sup>

Beliefs or cynicisms aside the Occult Museum, and others like it, functions as a valuable chronicle of contemporary culture’s obsession with the supernatural in all its peculiar manifestations. The question is not whether these things exist, but whether they are believed to exist, to quote Clarke, “in a basic sense, ghosts exist because people constantly report that they see them.”<sup>1059</sup> As John W. Morehead discerns, the Warrens’ work “arose in the 1970s with American popular culture’s interest in the paranormal and the demonic, and they helped pave the way for contemporary interest in these subjects.”<sup>1060</sup> Furthermore their work served as valuable source material for numerous contemporary horror films. It seems that far from banishing Annabelle to obscurity, its arrival at The Occult Museum marked a turning point for this doll. Annabelle is notorious within the paranormal community, and recent visual adaptations of its curious history have surely assisted in introducing it to a wider global audience, as such its tale has crossed time, weaving past legend with present media. Annabelle it seems is still very much a fixture of its haunted history and its narrative remains ripe for adaptation.

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<sup>1057</sup> Harker, *Demonic Dolls*, 43.

<sup>1058</sup> Graham, *Haunted Stuff*, 41-42.

<sup>1059</sup> Clarke, *A Natural History of Ghosts*, 17.

<sup>1060</sup> Morehead, “Warren, Ed and Lorraine,” 368.

## Conjuring a Universe, The James Wan Effect

At present *The Conjuring* universe consists of three main segments, which recurrently overlap, intertwine, and connect. Firstly, *The Conjuring*, and its sequels *The Conjuring 2* (2016) and *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* (2021), place the Warrens themselves centre stage, depicting prominent instances from their case files. Secondly, the Annabelle films, *Annabelle*, and *Annabelle: Creation*, give backstories for the doll's past before the Warrens, and *Annabelle Comes Home* connects back to *The Conjuring*'s pre-credit scene in which the Warrens take over ownership of the doll, securing it within a glass case in their museum. Thirdly, *The Nun* (2018)<sup>1061</sup> provides an origin story for *The Conjuring 2*'s demon, Valak. The commercial success of each of these films ensured the continuation of the Conjuring storyline,<sup>1062</sup> and thus, secured its status, as Scott Mendelson observes, as “a full-blown cinematic universe that any studio would envy.”<sup>1063</sup> A universe open to expansion through new instalments and able to develop and flourish, both narratively and financially, in conjunction with its audience.

At the centre of *The Conjuring* universe is writer, producer, director, and “authorial architect”<sup>1064</sup> James Wan. Despite its transauthorial structure Wan has claimed *The Conjuring* world as his own,<sup>1065</sup> and in doing so, has, as Laura Mee observes, “provided an identifiable creative center around which to brand the series.”<sup>1066</sup> Wan directed both *The Conjuring* and *The Conjuring 2*,

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<sup>1061</sup> A sequel, *The Nun II*, is set to premiere in the United States of America on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2023.

<sup>1062</sup> This continuation is not, however, entirely guaranteed. Wan confirmed the cancellation of the in-development *The Crooked Man* film on his personal Instagram page in November 2022, “no, unfortunately the spin-off movie with this character isn’t happening. Outside of my control. But maybe one day.” - Wan, James (@creepypuppet), “Throwback to my tall friend, the Crooked Man played by the incredible @jbotet,” *Instagram*, November 4, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CkjdCQwyr4N/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CkjdCQwyr4N/?img_index=1).

<sup>1063</sup> Scott Mendelson, “Box Office: ‘Annabelle: Creation’ Dips Just 56% For \$15.5M Weekend,” *Forbes*, accessed August 20, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmen-delson/2017/08/20/box-office-annabelle-creation-dips-just-56-for-15-5m-weekend/amp/>.

<sup>1064</sup> Laura Mee, “Conjuring a Universe: James Wan, Creepy Dolls and Demon Nuns,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2021): 7.

<sup>1065</sup> See David Crow, “Annabelle 3 Confirmed, Set in Warren House,” *Den of Geek*, accessed July 20, 2018, <http://www.denofgeek.com/uk/movies/59205/annabelle-3-con-firmed-set-in-warren-house>.

<sup>1066</sup> Mee, “Conjuring a Universe,” 2.

produced *Annabelle* and *Annabelle: Creation*, and co-wrote and co-produced *The Nun*, *Annabelle Comes Home* and *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*. Previously principally associated with ‘splat pack’ horror filmmakers,<sup>1067</sup> including Rob Zombie<sup>1068</sup> and Eli Roth,<sup>1069</sup> as fellow pioneers of the torture porn subgenre,<sup>1070</sup> Wan’s status has shifted over the past decade to that of “blockbuster horror auteur.”<sup>1071</sup> Auteur theory,<sup>1072</sup> coined by a group of critics for the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1951 - present), stemmed from the belief that “American cinema was worth studying in depth, that masterpieces were made not only by a small upper crust of directors, the cultured gilt on the commercial gingerbread, but by a whole range of authors, whose work had previously been dismissed and consigned to oblivion.”<sup>1073</sup> Andrew Sarris’s ‘Notes on the Auteur Theory’ presented a variant of this for American film criticism, which “provided a critical tool that allowed critics to take popular cinema seriously and evaluate movies as personal works that voice the internal visions of the directors. It stated that many directors, rather than simply putting screenplay into images, created. Rather than being products of a studio, some films were highly personal.”<sup>1074</sup> First applied to directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford, auteur theory located aesthetic and narrative

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<sup>1067</sup> ‘Splat pack’ refers to a wave of film directors who specialised in producing gruesome, graphically violent, horror films during the early 2000s. Alongside Wan, Zombie, and Roth other members included Alexandre Aja, Darren Lynn Bousman, and Greg McLean. “Splat pack” was first coined by film historian Alan Jones in an article entitled ‘The New Blood’ which he wrote for the April 2006 issue of British film magazine *Total Film* – Alan Jones, “The New Blood,” *Total Film* (April 2006): 104.

<sup>1068</sup> Whose notable work includes *House of a 1000 Corpses* (2003), *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), and *Halloween* (2007).

<sup>1069</sup> Whose notable work includes *Cabin Fever* (2002), *Hostel* (2005), and *Hostel: Part II* (2007).

<sup>1070</sup> First popularised by David Edelstein in his 2006 *New York* article, ‘Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn,’ the torture porn label has since “been applied (often retroactively) to more than forty horror films made since 2003.” – Steve Jones, *Torture Porn: Popular Horror After Saw* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1. The press (and arguably, public opinion) were quick to denounce it as “21<sup>st</sup> century’s vilest new genre.” – “Charming Fly Boys Pull Out of a Nosedive,” *Daily Mail*, June 1, 2007, <https://go-gale-com.hull.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=STND&u=unihull&id=GALE|A164336031&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>. Yet, as Tara Brady observes, it is reckless to blindly dismiss the subgenre as it is “one of the major cultural corner stones of the decade.” – Tara Brady, “It Came, It Sawed, It Conquered”, *The Irish Times*, October 26, 2010, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/it-came-it-sawed-it-conquered-1.668414>. Jones defines the subgenre as containing films made “(roughly) after 2003 [...] [which] centralise abduction, binding, imprisonment, and torture (mental or physical) and [...] [which] broadly belong to the horror genre.” – Jones, *Torture Porn*, 8.

<sup>1071</sup> Mee, “Conjuring a Universe,” 216.

<sup>1072</sup> In French, *Politique des Auteurs*.

<sup>1073</sup> Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 74.

<sup>1074</sup> Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Matthew Edwards, “Introduction: James Wan, Auteur”, in *The Cinema of James Wan: Critical Essays*, eds. Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Matthew Edwards (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2022), 2.

patterns of repetition within the creator's work. Through this, as Tyson Wils observes, the author's work can thus be read as "as a textual system or an underlying, unconscious structure."<sup>1075</sup>

Wan as auteur, is a director whose catalogue is imbued with certain particular topics and aesthetics. In his work this structure translates, as Mee observes, into his "particular brand of contemporary Gothic"<sup>1076</sup> which favours "demonic possessions, jump scares and haunted houses over violence and gore."<sup>1077</sup> These motifs pepper *The Conjuring* universe and are to be found in numerous of his other works, including *Dead Silence* (2007), *Insidious* (2010), and *Lights Out* (2016). Wan has maintained that a significant motivation in his move toward a more supernatural mode of horror, was to rid himself of the 'splat-plat' label and associated confines of the torture porn subgenre.<sup>1078</sup> Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Matthew Edwards suggest that *Dead Silence* was a notable step towards this, which positioned him "as a dignified successor of [...] director Jacques Tourneur's kind of 'creepy', atmospheric haunting cinema,"<sup>1079</sup> as present in *Cat People* (1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). His influence cannot be understated, indeed, as Berns and Edwards note, "thanks to Wan, Hollywood recuperated the aesthetics of classical -old-school horror [...]. Currently, Hollywood has discarded the classical 'jump-scare' to embrace the subtler 'Wan -jump-scare', a complex mix of -old-school technique with awareness of the mechanisms of cinematographic horror."<sup>1080</sup> Wan's brand, reflective of a broader trend in mainstream contemporary horror away from visceral violence and towards the supernatural, now concentrates less on overt jump scares and more on gradually constructing an unsettling atmosphere, thus

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<sup>1075</sup> Tyson Wils, "Paratexts and the Commercial Promotion of Film Authorship: James Wan and *Saw*," *Senses of Cinema* 6 (2013): 7.

<sup>1076</sup> Mee, "Conjuring a Universe," 216.

<sup>1077</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>1078</sup> "After SAW, I wanted to shake the "torture-porn" label and do something less graphic and more atmospheric. Being huge fans of ghost stories and haunted houses, Leigh Whannell and I wanted to do our own version of those films, and felt we could make it for very little money to retain complete creative control." - Wan, James (@creepypuppet), "This little indie movie was released 11 years ago today," *Facebook*, April 1, 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/creepypuppet/posts/10159403411346487?ref=embed\\_post](https://www.facebook.com/creepypuppet/posts/10159403411346487?ref=embed_post).

<sup>1079</sup> Pagnoni Berns and Edwards, "Introduction," 10.

<sup>1080</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

imposing “a uniquely rich style and vision which does not reject commercial or genre formulas, but in fact, embraces it [*sic*].”<sup>1081</sup> From his work it is evident that Wan shows an excellent appreciation for, and understanding of, classic horror cinema and the ways in which their scares are created. He has stressed the importance of craft, commenting that, “we think craft is important, and the irony has always been that horror may be disregarded by critics, but often they are the best-made movies you’re going to find in terms of craft. You can’t scare people if they see the seams.”<sup>1082</sup> In *The Conjuring* universe this understanding can be detected, Pagnoni Berns and Edwards suggest, through “Wan’s skill at conjuring sudden pangs of horror derived from less obvious sources.”<sup>1083</sup> In other words, turning ostensibly ordinary objects into entities which hold a threatening, uncanny, or distorted edge, the Annabelle doll an evident example of this which skillfully undermines viewers’ perceptions and recurrently violates their senses. Wan is also a bankable choice, a reliable box office draw who in 2014 launched his own horror production company, Atomic Monster Productions. The company is responsible for all three *Annabelle* films, *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019), and *Malignant* (2021), with *Salem’s Lot* and *The Nun 2* titles currently in development. Wan’s central role within the horror genre seems unshakeable.

David Church posits that the contemporary horror film franchise is “a multi-film series that not only expands chronologically forward (as with a sequel) or backward (prequel) from an initial filmic text, but also includes a horizontal expansion of ancillary intertexts” comprising of spinoffs, reboots, and remakes alongside “official merchandise and unofficial fan-made productions.”<sup>1084</sup> *The Conjuring* universe fits this mould, consisting of a number of interrelated “multiplicities,” which, as Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer note “take a number of distinct but hardly mutually exclusive forms, including adaptations, sequels, remakes, imitations,

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<sup>1081</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>1082</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>1083</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1084</sup> David Church, “Seriality Between the Horror Franchise and the Horror Anthology Film,” in *Horror Franchise Cinema*, eds. Mark McKenna and William Proctor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 179.



trilogies, reboots, series, spin-offs, and cycles.”<sup>1085</sup> The timeline of these films, as Mee surmises, is somewhat complex:

*The Conjuring 2* is a sequel to *The Conjuring*, *Annabelle: Creation* is a prequel to *Annabelle*, itself a prequel to *The Conjuring*, *The Nun* functions as a prequel to *The Conjuring 2* by outlining an origin story for its antagonist, *Annabelle Comes Home* is both a third *Annabelle* film and a sequel to *The Conjuring*, while *Annabelle* and *The Nun* [...] are also spin-offs from *The Conjuring* and its sequel.<sup>1086</sup>

Recent additions to the series are more straightforward. *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* is a further sequel to the first two films, and the forthcoming *The Nun II* is a direct sequel to the first. Each instalment functions as a standalone piece with a self-contained plot, while also “linking to other instalments through the appearance of characters, and tying together narratives in pre-credits, mid or post-credit and closing scenes.”<sup>1087</sup> Indeed, as Klein and Palmer argue, each new release can be considered as both “an emergent singularity and a part of what has gone before, as an entity for but not entirely in itself, as a textualization that is sufficiently insufficient, never hermetic, but instead always open to extension.”<sup>1088</sup> Within this context the three strands of *The Conjuring* universe can be read as separate yet connected entities, joined by a succession of what Mark J. Wolf terms “threads” or “braids,” which may run parallel before fracturing “as characters depart and go their separate ways.”<sup>1089</sup> The choice to brand the series as a universe rather than a

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<sup>1085</sup> Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer, “Introduction”, in *Cycles, Sequels, Spin-Offs, Remakes and Reboots: Multiplicities in Film and Television*, eds. Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 1. These multiplicities have been a feature of cinema since its inception for “the reuse, reconfiguration, and extension of existing materials, themes, images, formal conventions or motifs, and even ensembles of performers constitute irresistible adjuncts to continuing textual production.” – Ibid.

<sup>1086</sup> Mee, “Conjuring a Universe,” 4.

<sup>1087</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1088</sup> Klein and Barton Palmer, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>1089</sup> Mark J. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 199. While some stories “are content to follow a singular narrative thread, many stories [...] bring together multiple narrative threads, which run concurrently [...] As multiple threads share the same diegetic materials, themes, or events, the individual threads can become tightly woven together into what we might call narrative braids.” – Ibid.

franchise is a conscious one, and it has evolved as new filmmakers continue to adhere to, and contribute to, Wan's contemporary Gothic brand.

Jonathan Gray asserts that outside of the films themselves, a franchise's paratexts including trailers, promotion, and merchandising are significant for they hold "considerable power to amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning."<sup>1090</sup> In the case of *The Conjuring* universe Annabelle is significant in this respect, promotional posters for *The Conjuring* prominently feature the doll, thus prompting audience expectation of its significance, strengthening intertextual connections between films, and legitimizing subsequent spinoffs. Distributor Warner Bros. hosted virtual reality video tours of *The Conjuring* universes' respective haunted houses and marketed a collectible Annabelle doll to audiences. While the producers of *Annabelle: Creation* "offered fans the chance to win a trip to LA to meet New Line producers in exchange for creating their own Annabelle-inspired short film—the winner, *The Nurse* (2017) introduces a new monster to the universe."<sup>1091</sup> This audience contribution, alongside more traditional fan created art is actively encouraged, and is another thread akin to Matthew Freeman's notion of "commodity braiding"<sup>1092</sup> which interweaves supplementary material with the core narrative threads. The world that Wan initiated with *The Conjuring* is still relatively modest, comprising to date of a few films featuring predominantly real-life settings and characters, yet nonetheless, as Mee asserts, "it occupies an ever-expanding horror-fantasy universe haunted by supernatural monsters and demons who interact with each other [...] connected by key protagonists."<sup>1093</sup> It is the doll at the centre of this universe with which this chapter is concerned, a figure whose story starts with the Warrens' own, before spiralling off into a multitude of chilling additional narratives.

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<sup>1090</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 46.

<sup>1091</sup> Mee, "Conjuring a Universe," 5-6.

<sup>1092</sup> Matthew Freeman, "The Wonderful Game of Oz and Tarzan Jigsaws: Commodifying Transmedia in Early Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture," *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media* 7 (Summer 2014): 47.

<sup>1093</sup> Mee, "Conjuring a Universe," 5.

### **'Based on a True Story' Horror: James Wan's *The Conjuring***

*The Conjuring* (2013) deftly marries the haunted house and exorcism subgenres of horror to produce an unnerving, purportedly true account of domestic horror. The film lies, as Xavier Aldana Reyes discerns, “halfway between the parapsychological investigation and the demonic schlock of *The Exorcist* [...] [and is] the latest manipulation in a long Gothic tradition that goes back to the beginnings of cinema.”<sup>1094</sup> The success of Scott Derrickson's *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), Daniel Stamm's *The Last Exorcism* (2010), and William Brent Bell's *The Devil Inside* (2012) reveals renewed audience interest in exorcism horror, while the popularity of Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), Jee-woon Kim's *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), and Oren Peli's *Paranormal Activity* (2007) exposes a strong consumer appetite for haunted house cinema. Upon its release *The Conjuring* topped the US box office,<sup>1095</sup> establishing a record for an R-rated horror film.<sup>1096</sup>

Critical reception to the film was likewise generally favourable. Owen Williams noted that “despite a catalogue of immediately recognisable ghost devices” *The Conjuring* was “at once eerily familiar and devastatingly effective” amounting “to more than the sum of its scary parts.”<sup>1097</sup> While Matthew Taylor commended Wan's “shrewd manipulation of screen space” and “precise attention to sound” that assured all tricks were carried out “with considerable potency.”<sup>1098</sup> More than just a commercial hit though, *The Conjuring* generated, as Pagnoni Berns and Edwards observe, “a complete, coherent universe akin to that created by Universal Studios in the classical era of the

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<sup>1094</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes, “Gothic and Cinema: The Development of An Aesthetic Filmic Mode”, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Gothic and the Arts*, ed. David Punter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 403.

<sup>1095</sup> Grossing \$41,855,326 on its opening weekend – “The Conjuring,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt1457767/?ref\\_=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=the%20conjuring](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt1457767/?ref_=instant_tt_1&q=the%20conjuring).

<sup>1096</sup> See John W. Morehead, “Perron, Roger and Carolyn”, in *Spirit Possession Around the World: Possession, Communion, and Demon Expulsion Across Cultures*, ed. Joseph P. Laycock (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 285.

<sup>1097</sup> Owen Williams, “The Conjuring Review,” *Empire*, February 27, 2013, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/conjuring-review/>.

<sup>1098</sup> Matthew Taylor, “The Conjuring,” *Sight and Sound*, (August 2013): 74.

1930s and 1940s,”<sup>1099</sup> a universe open to continued expansion and within which Wan’s monsters disconcertingly cohabit.

The apparent authenticity of *The Conjuring* is plainly stressed,<sup>1100</sup> it is “based on a true story,”<sup>1101</sup> and the supernatural inferences of the original tale are unchallenged.<sup>1102</sup> As such, the film banks on the broader popularity of the ‘true story’ account within horror, something that as Mee stresses:

Has long acted as a genre selling point. From loose inspiration (Ed Gein for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* 1974), dramatization (*The Amityville Horror* 1979) or total fabrications (*The Blair Witch Project* 1999), an association with historical ‘real events’ might be used to ascribe authenticity to an otherwise questionable story, to reassure audience’s reservations around seeing a disreputable film, or to excuse narrative or ideological incoherence.<sup>1103</sup>

In echoing these ‘real life’ horror classics, *The Conjuring* connects to the current cycle of similar horror narratives which likewise lay claim, sometimes falsely, to a genuine factual basis.<sup>1104</sup>

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<sup>1099</sup> Pagnoni Berns and Edwards, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>1100</sup> Originally entitled *The Warren Files*, later retitled *The Conjuring*.

<sup>1101</sup> *The Conjuring*. Directed by James Wan. Burbank, CA: New Line Cinema, 2013.

<sup>1102</sup> In 2016 Gerald Brittle author of *The Demonologist: The Extraordinary Career of Ed and Lorraine Warren* (1980) attempted to sue Warner Brothers, New Line Productions, and James Wan for \$900 million. He claimed that the franchise infringed “on his exclusive rights to create derivative works based on the Warrens’ cases. [...] [adding that] in a 1978 agreement for his book, the couple agreed to a no ‘competing work’ provision that is still in effect [...] [thus] the Warrens aren’t allowed to make or contract any works based on the ‘same subject’ as *The Demonologist*, specifically their ‘lives and experiences as paranormal investigators.” - Ashley Cullins, “Warner Bros. Facing \$900 Million Lawsuit Over ‘The Conjuring’ Franchise,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 31, 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/warner-bros-facing-900-million-lawsuit-conjuring-franchise-990107/>. The lawsuit was retracted in 2017.

<sup>1103</sup> Mee, “Conjuring a Universe,” 11-12.

<sup>1104</sup> Notable examples include Bryan Bertino’s *The Strangers* (2008), Peter Cornwell’s *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009), Mikael Häfström’s *The Rite* (2011), Scott Derrickson’s *Deliver Us From Evil* (2014), and Michael Spierig’s *Winchester* (2018).

In the case of the Warrens while in reality their professional integrity was widely questioned, on screen, they are, as Murray Leeder quips, “full-blown demon-fighting heroes with God on their side.”<sup>1105</sup> Within *The Conjuring* Wan utilizes, as Kevin J Wetmore discerns, a variety of cinematic techniques:

To impress on the audience that what they are watching is as much documentary as narrative film [...] The end title credits make the link between the film and real life obvious by using actual newspaper accounts of the Warrens, and then by placing photos of the real people [...] with the names of the actors who played them in the film. [...] the implication is that the film presents these people [...] exactly as they were in life.<sup>1106</sup>

On screen the Warrens’ credentials for dealing with such terrors is established early on: “since the 1960s, Ed and Lorraine Warren have been known as the world’s most renowned paranormal investigators. Lorraine is a gifted clairvoyant, while Ed is the only non-ordained Demonologist recognised by the Catholic church.”<sup>1107</sup> Both Lorraine and the Perron family assisted Wan as consultants on the film,<sup>1108</sup> and the narrative stems from details preserved in the Warrens’ case files.

Out of the multitude of disturbing cases they have dealt with during their controversial careers however, “there is one case so malevolent, they’ve kept it locked away until now,”<sup>1109</sup> and it is on this case that *The Conjuring* focuses. The plot details the distressing ghostly events that plagued Roger (Ron Livingston) and Carolyn Perron (Lili Taylor) and their five children, after their move to a dilapidated nineteenth-century farmhouse in Harrisville, Rhode Island, in 1971. The

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<sup>1105</sup> Murray Leeder, *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* (London, Bloomsbury, 2018), 84.

<sup>1106</sup> Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *The Conjuring* (Liverpool: Auteur, 2021), 44.

<sup>1107</sup> Wan, *The Conjuring*.

<sup>1108</sup> Lorraine also makes a cameo appearance.

<sup>1109</sup> Wan, *The Conjuring*.

Perrons call upon the Warrens' expertise and they uncover "that the home's violent spectral activity is tied to the original occupant, Bathsheba Jetson, a descendant of one of the women executed in Salem for witchcraft."<sup>1110</sup> Bathsheba had sacrificed her new-born child to the Devil, hanged herself, and thus cursed the property and its inhabitants. As Pulliam notes, "Wan represents Bathsheba not as an ethereal, pale-coloured wraith, but a terrifying corporeal whose white flesh is shot through with black veins as if she was an animated corpse."<sup>1111</sup> Accordingly the threat she poses is not merely abstract but grotesquely present and inhuman. To prevent Carolyn from mirroring Bathsheba's crime and killing her youngest daughter, Ed (Patrick Wilson) performs an impromptu exorcism.

The opening sequence of *The Conjuring* is practically duplicated as the opening sequence to *Annabelle*, further intertwining the two narratives. Wan establishes a visceral fear of Annabelle from the very start as the opening frame's black screen cuts to reveal a partial shot of the doll's split glass eye, gouged porcelain cheek, and bloody smeared lips. Here the grotesque caricature of idealised childhood femininity with porcelain skin, rouged cheeks, and wide eyes appears to have endured the brute force of human harm and been left marked. Utilising pre-credit scenes to introduce characters, narrative, and tone, is a common cinematic technique, and one, as Mee notes:

That is frequently employed to great effect in horror cinema when offering audiences their first peek of a monstrous threat or eliciting an initial scare – think of a young Michael Myers murders his sister in *Halloween* (1978), a highly-billed star is brutally murdered in *Scream* (1996), the zombie apocalypse causes chaos in *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and a woman flees an unseen force in *It Follows* (2014).<sup>1112</sup>

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<sup>1110</sup> Pulliam, "Dolls," 66.

<sup>1111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1112</sup> Mee, "Conjuring a Universe," 1.

*The Conjuring's* opening sequence conforms to this outline, and teases the arrival of subsequent *Annabelle* films, whilst also initiating viewers into the Warrens' world, and thus the narrative trail that the rest of the series will chart.

Mirroring the myths that surround the actual Annabelle doll this scene depicts the 'Annabelle case' as relayed to the Warrens by two terrified friends who require the demonologists' assistance to rid the world of this inhuman spirit. Interestingly, this dialogue has been drawn nearly verbatim from the record of the Warrens' initial dealings with Annabelle, as recorded in Gerald Brittle's *The Demonologist*. It's clear from this opening that Annabelle is plainly something to be feared – it is “something that's never walked the earth in human form, something demonic.”<sup>1113</sup> This threat is framed through the Warrens' Catholic beliefs; as Pulliam observes, the supernatural threats here “are not misunderstood lost souls, but malignant and dangerous entities.”<sup>1114</sup> The Warrens point to the existence of a demonic underworld comprised of both human and inhuman spirits which pose a very real threat to their human counterparts; “human spirits, which once walked the earth as individuals, can be either positive or negative in intent. In contrast, inhuman spirits never had a corporeal existence, but instead roam the earth through oppression or possession of a human spirit. These inhuman spirits can represent elemental (or natural) forces, demonic powers, or even the devil.”<sup>1115</sup> This opening introduces a recurrent theme of *The Conjuring* universe, that of the potential danger posed by both seemingly innocuous childhood toys and their youthful owners, as well as the greater evil, masquerading as innocent that may reside within both. As Kevin J. Wetmore observes there is a distinctive parallel between Rory's mirrored music box in *The Conjuring*, and the Annabelle doll of later instalments: “both supernatural entities use a toy as a conduit to connect with the living. Both entities seek connection with the living [...] Between the doll and the music box [...] it is clear that in the world of the conjuring, toys are conduits by

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<sup>1113</sup> Wan, *The Conjuring*.

<sup>1114</sup> Pulliam, “Dolls,” 66.

<sup>1115</sup> Chase, *Ghost Hunters*, 4.

which supernatural beings can interact with and have efficacy in our reality.”<sup>1116</sup> The doll, however, is the more malicious of the two, as it actively endeavours to possess the adult occupants of the house within which it resides.

The friends had been told previously by a psychic that the doll had belonged to a seven-year-old girl named Annabelle Higgins who had died in the apartment and that Annabelle’s spirit desired their friendship. They gave it their permission to inhabit the doll and shortly afterwards disturbing incidents began to occur: “it started out small like its head or leg was in a completely different position [...] then one day it was in a different room.”<sup>1117</sup> The friends insisted that the doll appeared to move of its own accord, furniture was found overturned and damaged, peculiar noises were heard, and blood red child-like writing was scrawled on notes, walls, and ceilings. Their attempt to dispose of the doll was futile. The Warrens insisted that they had made a “big mistake acknowledging the doll” for this had allowed the conduit to “infest their lives.”<sup>1118</sup> This case is relayed to the audience at one of the Warrens’ public lectures, when asked about the doll’s current whereabouts, they insist that it is “someplace safe.”<sup>1119</sup>

*The Conjuring* ascertains, in its initial minutes, the potential for demonic beings to utilize lifeless objects as conduits. Ed, when questioned on why such objects are kept in a storage room, retorts that “sometimes it’s better to keep the genie in the lamp.”<sup>1120</sup> This exchange is noteworthy, for, as Joshua Schulze stresses, it primes the audience “from the start to be aware of the possibility that seemingly innocuous things may in fact be under demonic control, which results in the film configuring an intriguing relationship to nonhuman matter.”<sup>1121</sup> The viewer is thus primed to be

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<sup>1116</sup> Wetmore, *The Conjuring*, 69.

<sup>1117</sup> Wan, *The Conjuring*.

<sup>1118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1121</sup> Joshua Schulze, “James Wan’s Dead Space: *The Conjuring* Films, Siegfried Kracauer and the Revenge of Physical Reality”, in *The Cinema of James Wan: Critical Essays*, eds. Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Matthew Edwards (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2022), 69.



alert for particular details that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. Wan's skillful use of wide shots and sparse framing "accentuate the space surrounding the characters at any given moment, thereby increasing the sense of dread that something unsavory may be lurking close by."<sup>1122</sup> This produces the "spaces replete with dark pockets of menacing vacancy"<sup>1123</sup> which Karl Schoonover identifies as integral to the horror genre. The horror genre, particularly within narratives which take place in a purportedly haunted space, has, as Schulze identifies, long "turned to the inanimate and the nonhuman to be used as vessels for the paranormal."<sup>1124</sup> He goes on to argue that within this established tradition, "few filmmakers have been as tactful as Wan in their use of empty space and a sparse composition style to amplify our awareness of every object contained within the frame—so much so [...] that the physical reality, and -assumed-to-be-passive matter, yields the capacity to be redeemed."<sup>1125</sup>

In many respects *The Conjuring* is a classic piece of horror cinema with explicit and implicit connections to *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), and *Poltergeist* (1982), among others. There is little of the graphic violence or cheap scare tactics that are arguably present in much mainstream contemporary horror. This relates to the ongoing, highly contentious debate regarding so called 'elevated horror'. Films such as David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) have been dubbed by critics as examples of 'elevated horror'.<sup>1126</sup> These films, as David Church notes, "emerged from the crucible of major film festivals like Sundance and Toronto with significant critical buzz for supposedly transcending the horror genre's oft-presumed lowbrow

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<sup>1122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1123</sup> Karl Schoonover, "What Do We Do with Vacant Space in Horror Films?," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 40:3 (2018): 345.

<sup>1124</sup> Schulze, "James Wan's Dead Space," 71.

<sup>1125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1126</sup> Also referred to as 'indie horror', 'post horror', 'prestige horror', 'slow horror', or 'smart horror'. As David Church notes "the label 'elevated horror' continues to be more prevalent in the United States, while 'post-horror' has become more common in British critical contexts." - David Church, *Post-Horror: Art, Genre and Cultural Elevation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 3.

status, and succeeded in crossing over to multiplexes.”<sup>1127</sup> However the elitist overtones of this term attracted criticism from genre fans for the inclusion of the modifier ‘elevated’ suggests, “as with ‘prestige’, [...] a raising of horror up to a certain degree of respectability”<sup>1128</sup> that it is implied the genre is lacking. Rather than it being entirely pejorative however, Church suggests that ‘elevation’ “also implies raising the genre to a level where it might mix with genres already associated with ‘higher’ aesthetic strata, such as character-based dramas.”<sup>1129</sup> In his take on the debate, critic Matt Zoller Seitz’s suggested that these labels are ultimately somewhat insignificant: “elevated horror is like an artisanal cheeseburger. Make the goddamn cheeseburger. If it’s delicious, nobody will care what adjective you put in front of it.”<sup>1130</sup> Wan was praised for “finally ‘making good’ on his torture-porn roots”<sup>1131</sup> with *The Conjuring*<sup>1132</sup> and the film “received very positive reviews as [...] [a] gore-free [...] [throwback] to old-fashioned haunted-house scares.”<sup>1133</sup> This throwback appeal can arguably be partly attributed to the 1970s backdrop of the film’s source material, indicated via “small, easily-missed captions announcing times and places, and a proliferation of long, sharp-finned cars, shaggy men’s hair-cuts, and frilly, high-necked blouses.”<sup>1134</sup> Yet this 1970s iconography is, as Dara Downey observes, a touch vague, and “seems to exist more in order to foster a sort of stylistic prettiness than to produce any kind of carefully detailed realism.”<sup>1135</sup>

All the familiar iconography of haunted house cinema is present here: peculiar smells, strange noises, creaking woodwork, ominous cellar, indeed the occupants’ insistence that they

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<sup>1127</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>1128</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>1129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1130</sup> Matt Zoller Seitz (@mattzollerseitz), “Elevated horror is like an artisanal cheeseburger,” *Twitter*, March 24, 2019, <https://twitter.com/mattzollerseitz/status/1110032050126503936>.

<sup>1131</sup> David Church, “Apprehension Engines: The New Independent ‘Prestige Horror’”, in *New Blood: Critical Approaches to Contemporary Horror*, eds. Eddie Falvey, Joe Hickinbottom, and Jonathan Wroot (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2020), 26.

<sup>1132</sup> And *Insidious*.

<sup>1133</sup> Church, “Apprehension Engines,” 26.

<sup>1134</sup> Dara Downey, “The Conjuring,” *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 13 (Summer 2014): 125-126.

<sup>1135</sup> Ibid.

cannot leave despite the terrors that plague them, is “a plaint familiar to those who have seen more than one cinematic domestic haunting.”<sup>1136</sup> Many of the films more successful scares derive from details concerning material objects and the structure of the house itself. Doors, windows, floorboards, and pieces of furniture slam, rattle, creak, and move with abandon, while dolls, toys, and other figures appear to awaken unaided, moving in unison as if affected by some imperceptible force. Again and again, through playful manipulation of the viewer’s senses, Wan turns seemingly everyday objects into something that instils abject terror. This use of the familiar gone awry is, Pagnoni Berns and Edwards propose, a common technique in his work, one he uses “as a means of driving conflicting emotions from his viewers. When we should be seeing objects that bring pleasure, practicality or, at least, a sense of familiarity, instead they are rendered in a manner that conveys the exact opposite: the non-familiar, producing a disconcerting, eerie effect.”<sup>1137</sup> Wan’s approach to eliciting shock has conceivably evolved since *Saw*, as he now favours “scaring his audience instead of bludgeoning them with excessive gore.”<sup>1138</sup> The explicit brutal violence utilized as a means to disturb, replaced with the uncanny distortion of the familiar, the latter a more subtle, arguably technically superior method for producing scares.

From both *The Conjuring*’s opening scene and the film’s posters and promotional materials which showcased the doll centerstage, it is expected that Annabelle’s role in the film will be significant. Yet the doll is somewhat sidelined. Wan never explicitly details how exactly it fits into the Perron household’s tale, and by consciously doing this he arguably fosters, as Downey suggests, “a sense of mystery and of phenomena too vast to fit comfortably within a single text.”<sup>1139</sup> In *The Conjuring* the demonic doll Annabelle and its backstory function as both side-plot and the hook

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<sup>1136</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>1137</sup> Pagnoni Berns and Edwards, “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>1138</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>1139</sup> Downey, “The Conjuring,” 126.

with which viewers are enticed and welcomed into the haunting, demon-infested world of the Warrens.<sup>1140</sup>

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<sup>1140</sup> The cursed doll makes another brief appearance in the film when it terrorizes the Warrens' daughter, Judy. "As an act of revenge against the help the Warrens are giving the Perrons, the witch Bathsheba presents herself to Judy in a dark room with the Annabelle doll on her legs. This short scene, in which the girl is not hurt because of her parents' prompt intervention, foreshadows *Annabelle Comes Home's* action." - Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary American Horror* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 113.

### Doll as Demonic Conduit: John R. Leonetti's *Annabelle*

If *The Conjuring* is merely an introduction to *Annabelle* by Wan, “the patron saint of creepy puppets,”<sup>1141</sup> it is in Leonetti’s supernatural, psychological horror that the grotesque doll takes centre stage. Significantly altering the narrative aligned with the original doll, *Annabelle* details the events that follow after Mia (Annabelle Wallis) and John (Ward Horton) Gordon’s home is invaded by satanic cultists. The intruders later identified by news reports as Annabelle Higgins and boyfriend conjure an entity which takes over the seemingly innocent *Annabelle* doll transforming it from lifeless object into a malevolent force of evil. The Gordons subsequently endeavour to dispose of the doll due to its presence at the attack, yet it reappears, and ominous activity steadily plagues the family from then on.

Critical reception to the film was decidedly less favourable than its predecessor.<sup>1142</sup> Scott Foundas deemed it a “cut-rate-spin-off,”<sup>1143</sup> while Billy Goodykootx critiqued how it eschewed *The Conjuring*’s “nice, slow-burn.”<sup>1144</sup> Frank Scheck criticised its use of “cheap jolts” condemning it as “generic and formulaic,” favouring instead another icon of the creepy doll subgenre, concluding that “*Annabelle* is no *Chucky*.”<sup>1145</sup> Douglas Keesey was arguably more favourable in his summation of *Annabelle* as “a pleasingly overheated mess of horror motifs” pinpointing the presence of “possession, creepy dolls, [...] [and] sinister kids”<sup>1146</sup> within the film and stressing their

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<sup>1141</sup> Adam Nayman, “*Annabelle*,” *Sight and Sound* (December 2014): 64.

<sup>1142</sup> Notwithstanding *Annabelle* performed relatively well at the box-office. It grossed \$257,589,721 in global box office sales, an impressive return on its \$6,500,000 investment. - “*Annabelle*,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt3322940/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=annabelle](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt3322940/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=annabelle).

<sup>1143</sup> Scott Foundas, “Film Review: *Annabelle*,” *Variety*, October 2, 2014, <https://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/film-review-annabelle-1201319522/>.

<sup>1144</sup> Bill Goodykoontz, “Review: ‘*Annabelle*’ not as satisfying as ‘*Conjuring*,’” *USA Today*, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://eu.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/movies/2014/10/02/movie-review-annabelle-conjuring-stars/16558631/>.

<sup>1145</sup> Frank Scheck, “‘*Annabelle*’: Film Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 2, 2014, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/annabelle-film-review-737562/>.

<sup>1146</sup> Douglas Keesey, *Twenty First Century Horror Films: A Guide to the Best Contemporary Horror* (Harpenden: Kamera Books, 2017), 39.

centrality to the horror genre at large. Anne Billson aligned *Annabelle* with other contemporary high-profile horror films including Kevin Greutert's *Jessabelle* (2014) and Tom Harper's *The Woman in Black 2: Angel of Death* (2014) criticising how these “founder on sloppy storytelling and an over-reliance on hoary old methods of making us jump” yet are still “a welcome sign of the decline of noughties torture-porn,” a subgenre she deems “an unremitting grim ordeal not only for the unfortunate characters, but for audiences as well.”<sup>1147</sup> As such, *Annabelle* is illustrative of a wider shift in horror during this period away from brutal sadism and towards the supernatural.

Amongst the mass of precious dolls which Mia collects, Annabelle, proportionally child-sized, with auburn ringlets, white porcelain skin, piercing blue eyes, and overtly rouged lips and cheeks, is distinct. Annabelle is a gift from John to Mia who had previously “completely lost hope” at finding the rare doll, who “completes the set,”<sup>1148</sup> slotting seamlessly into Mia's collection.<sup>1149</sup> Annabelle is a caricature of the idealised young girl, but something is awry, the doll's skin is too pristine, its cheeks too red, its eyes unblinking. Susan Yi Sencindiver observes that the dread dolls provoke “especially those that are too life-like, is puzzling when considering our former easy familiarity and comfort found in the intimacy with the doll along with the childhood delight in the animated toy.”<sup>1150</sup> Thus these dolls, and specifically here, Annabelle, perfectly aligns with Freudian notions of the uncanny. This Annabelle is not the Raggedy Ann of the Warrens' collection but a porcelain figure, robed in white.<sup>1151</sup> By selecting a doll that from the outset appears overtly sinister, Leonetti arguably ensures that the discovery of the evil residing within the doll is less surprising. With the cinematic Annabelle doll viewers are primed to expect malevolence from the

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<sup>1147</sup> Anne Billson, “Cheap thrills: The frightful rise of low-budget horror,” *The Telegraph*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/it-follows/rise-of-low-budget-horror-movies-babadook/>.

<sup>1148</sup> *Annabelle*, directed by John R. Leonetti, performances by Ward Horton, Annabelle Wallis, and Alfre Woodard (2014; Burbank, CA: New Line Cinema, 2015), DVD.

<sup>1149</sup> The Annabelle doll's larger size marks it out as distinct though.

<sup>1150</sup> Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll's Uncanny Soul,” 108.

<sup>1151</sup> Consensus seems to suggest that this aesthetic change was made primarily to avoid copyright infringement. *Annabelle Comes Home* includes a brief clip of a young girl winning an Annabelle-like Raggedy Ann doll on a television gameshow, this visual easter egg paying homage to the original doll.

outset, in comparison the real-life Raggedy Ann appears virtually innocuous. Leonetti deems dolls to be a particularly fruitful vehicle for horror writers to work with for “most dolls are emulating a human figure [...] [yet] they’re missing one big thing, which is emotion. So they’re shells,” making them “a natural psychological and justifiable vehicle for demons to take it over. If you look at a doll in its eyes, it just stares. That’s creepy. They’re hollow inside. That space needs to be filled. With evil.”<sup>1152</sup>

On the very same night that John gives Mia the doll the couple’s neighbours, the Higginses, are slaughtered by their troubled daughter Annabelle (Keira Daniels) and her boyfriend. Six months prior to this attack Annabelle had left the family home to join a Manson-like satanic cult. In a scene recalling Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) Mia, after being woken by a scream, witnesses the murder as the shot is framed through an open window that directly faces the neighbours. These intruders then go on to invade the couple’s home. Annabelle Higgins and her accomplice’s attempt to murder Mia is powerfully reminiscent of actress Sharon Tate’s murder by the Manson family. As Adam Nayman argues, “set in a thriftily depicted 1969, *Annabelle* exploits its period setting more actively than *The Conjuring*. The opening scene, in which a suburban married couple [...] wake up in the middle of the night to discover that their next-door neighbours have been killed by crazed cultists, tastelessly evokes the Manson Family murders.”<sup>1153</sup> *Annabelle*’s connections to Roman Polanski are further deepened as the film, as Ian Cooper discerns, “conjurs up the spectre of *Rosemary’s Baby*” through Leonetti’s decision to name the persecuted mother Mia and her reserved husband John, through “rehousing the couple in a spooky apartment block which looks very like the Bramford” and finally, through Leonetti “mimicking Polanski’s creeping tracking shots.”<sup>1154</sup>

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<sup>1152</sup> Linda Rodriguez McRobbie, “The History of Creepy Dolls,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 15, 2015, [HTTP://WWW.SMITHSONIANMAG.COM/HISTORY/HISTORY-CREEPY-DOLLS-180955916/#VI05ZBXC00QG5QBC.99](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-creepy-dolls-180955916/#VI05ZBXC00QG5QBC.99).

<sup>1153</sup> Nayman, “*Annabelle*,” 64.

<sup>1154</sup> Ian Cooper, *The Manson Family on Film and Television* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2018), 39.

The news that Annabelle Higgins “ran away to join the hippies”<sup>1155</sup> is given against the backdrop of distressing broadcast footage of the Manson family murders. The focus upon satanism here, as Mee surmises, alludes to the decade’s “media obsession over cult crimes [...] as well as exploiting the contemporary popularization of true crime stories.”<sup>1156</sup> Pregnant Mia is warned by John that watching such a graphic news report could upset their unborn child, a conscious reference to the idea that consuming violent media produces violent children, even when in utero.<sup>1157</sup> The couple later learn from police that the two intruders had a strong interest in the occult, “they were trying to conjure something up [...] demons.”<sup>1158</sup> However this interest is concurrently dismissed as illogical, it is “all just a bunch of hocus pocus,” the authorities endorsing instead the view that they “were miscreants [...] probably hopped up on god knows what and it made them see and do all sorts of terrible things.”<sup>1159</sup> Thus fear of the supernatural is momentarily quashed in favour of more real-world horrors.

Upon her death the spirit of Annabelle Higgins enters the Annabelle doll, possessing it, making the doll, in the larger tradition of haunted dolls, as Pulliam argues, a “repository of the repressed.”<sup>1160</sup> After failing to kill Mia, Annabelle slits her own throat, causing droplets of blood to scatter on the doll’s face. This transference of bodily fluid instantaneously unifies human and doll, and thus adheres to Deborah Lupton’s definition of “the body without boundaries” the

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<sup>1155</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

<sup>1156</sup> Mee, “Conjuring a Universe,” 11-12.

<sup>1157</sup> The perceived correlation between exposure to media violence and increased aggressive behaviour is a contentious one. L. Rowell Huesmann states that “experiments unambiguously show that viewing violent videos, films, cartoons, or TV dramas or playing violent video games “cause” the risk to go up that the observing child will behave seriously aggressively toward [sic] others immediately afterward. This is true of preschoolers, elementary school children, high school children, college students, and adults. Those who watch the violent clips tend to behave more aggressively than those who view nonviolent clips, and they adopt beliefs that are more accepting of violence.” - L. Rowell Huesmann, “The Impact of Electronic Media Violence: Scientific Theory and Research,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41 (2007): 10.

<sup>1158</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

<sup>1159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1160</sup> Pulliam, “Dolls,” 86.



“permeable body, the liminal body, the leaking, fluid body [...] [that] has become a site of horror, dread and fear for its transgressive nature.”<sup>1161</sup> This blood connection between the doll and its human namesake alarms Mia. As Keeseey observes, “for these reasons, the doll becomes the locus of Mia’s maternal and filial fears, reminding her of her own ambivalence regarding her infant daughter.”<sup>1162</sup> Subsequently the couple are troubled by a plethora of seemingly supernatural occurrences. They are repeatedly awoken by strange noises, mechanical devices of their own accord appear to go awry, floorboards creak, and furniture moves yet seems unoccupied. Furthermore, the doll appears to move itself unaided from one position to another, from room to room. All of these give the strong impression that the house is haunted. After the earlier traumatic invasion, it appears rational that the couple may be on edge. A supernatural rationale for these eerie occurrences is thus scorned in favour of an anxiety driven, altogether more human, and more logical, explanation. The overriding threat here however is not psychological but supernatural, and housed in the body of a doll, Annabelle. Sensing this, Mia is adamant that they rid themselves of “that doll” pleading that they “have to get rid of it [...] she had it in her hands.”<sup>1163</sup> This prompts John, in an effort to calm his wife’s nerves, to dispose of it in the rubbish bin.

After this disposal these strange instances intensify, culminating in a kitchen fire which appears to supernaturally drag Mia towards its core. Mia believes the house to be cursed, and as such avows that she “can never go back there [...] not with her. No.”<sup>1164</sup> She insists that they move, yet the doll follows. Annabelle is later found by a perplexed John at the bottom of a moving box, “how did that get in there? I swear I threw it out?”<sup>1165</sup> Inexplicably Mia insists on keeping the gifted doll suggesting that things merely “got mixed up after the fire”<sup>1166</sup> and places Annabelle back

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<sup>1161</sup> Deborah Lupton, “Going with the Flow: Some Central Discourses in Conceptualising and Articulating the Embodiment of Emotional States,” in *The Body in Everyday Life*, ed. Sarah Nettleton and Jonathan Watson (London: Routledge, 2005), 97.

<sup>1162</sup> Keeseey, *Twenty First Century Horror Films*, 32.

<sup>1163</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

<sup>1164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1166</sup> *Ibid.*

amongst her collection. Settled on a shelf just above their baby's cot, Annabelle is, as Nayman discerns, "a sinisterly grinning symbol of an evil that won't be so easily outrun."<sup>1167</sup>

Mia conforms to the gendered stereotypes of *Annabelle's* idealised 1960s American setting. She is expected in her role as wife and mother, to both care for, and be subordinate to, her breadwinning husband, yet the Annabelle doll thwarts this path. When John comments that he has a gift for Mia, she jests that the "the last time you said that I ended up pregnant."<sup>1168</sup> The gift this time however is not a desired pregnancy but a wished-for collectable doll, and this comment conclusively binds the doll in her arms, to the infant in her womb, for both are implanted there by her husband. At the same time, as Pulliam notes, Mia's prized collection of dolls, of which Annabelle is the newest addition, as "idealized and fragile representations of juvenile femininity, contrast sharply with the actual child that she is expecting."<sup>1169</sup> Mia is "plagued by many of the same maternal anxieties, which form the nightmarish flipside to her dream of motherhood,"<sup>1170</sup> and as such *Annabelle* can be read partly as a loose allegory for postpartum depression. After witnessing the spirit of Annabelle Higgins hovering over her child's cot she confides in John who declares that these ghostly visions are merely "manifestations of your anxiety,"<sup>1171</sup> a product of her spending too much time alone in the apartment. Unstable female characters frequently populate Wan's horror films, and their volatile behaviour is often the catalyst for the supernatural occurrences that follow. Here, Mia, as archetypal tortured Gothic heroine, adheres to Pagnoni Berns and Edwards' view that, for these women, the home "is not the place of safety and stability, but a haunting ground gradually driving them insane. The home is after all the location where their potential identities have been buried to preserve the patriarchal system,"<sup>1172</sup> thus the supernatural here is

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<sup>1167</sup> Nayman, "Annabelle," 64.

<sup>1168</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

<sup>1169</sup> June Michele Pulliam, "Annabelle", in *Ghosts in Popular Culture and Legend*, ed. June Michele Pulliam and Anthony J. Fonseca (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2016), 8.

<sup>1170</sup> Keesey, *Twenty First Century Horror Films*, 31.

<sup>1171</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

<sup>1172</sup> Pagnoni Berns and Edwards, "Introduction," 11.

conflated with patriarchal oppression. Rather than functioning as a secure shelter, the home for Mia “becomes a site for dread and horror through the politics of domesticity and spatiality.”<sup>1173</sup> Upon learning from religious authorities that the devil within the doll “prays on the weak and the vulnerable, seeking to devour their souls” culminating in their “spill[ing] the blood of an innocent,”<sup>1174</sup> Mia vows to protect her child.

These anxieties come to a head in a setting so decrepit and ominous, that, as Nayman quips, “one almost expects Roman Polanski to cameo as the superintendent.”<sup>1175</sup> Mia sees a reflection of what appears to be the ghost of Annabelle Higgins staring back at her, whispering her name. Distracted, she loosens her grip on her child’s pram, it rolls backwards into the road, and is crushed by an approaching lorry. Due to the framing of this, the viewer is left, at first, to assume that the child has been crushed, before the camera pans to the child safe in Mia’s arms. Meanwhile the spectre of Annabelle Higgins cradles the Annabelle doll in her arms, mirroring Mia’s stance, and thus further emphasising the union between the two. Later Mia, distressed at the idea that her child may have been taken by demonic forces, frantically searches for the infant. She finds the nursery akin to a massacre, her assemblage of porcelain dolls’ faces smeared in blood, there is childlike scrawl etched on the ceiling, and the distant sound of a child sniggering. In this significant scene Mia discovers a doll instead of her daughter in the child’s cot. Angry at this deception, she slams the doppelgänger against the cot’s railings and throws it to the floor, only to realise that her own child is lying there, not the doll. Mia immediately breaks down in tears at the prospect that she may have killed her own child. This marks the notable moment in which doll and infant merge in Mia’s mind and thus reality.

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<sup>1173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1174</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

<sup>1175</sup> Nayman, “*Annabelle*,” 64.

In *Annabelle's* concluding scenes Mia calls on religious aid to rid the apartment of this occult threat. Father Perez (Tony Amendola) decrees that “demons can sometimes use objects as conduits to achieve their desired goal,” and decides to call on the assistance of the Warrens to prevent the demon from achieving this: “I’ve heard of a married couple that the church has worked with in the past that deal with this type of thing.”<sup>1176</sup> As an interim measure he offers to take the doll with the belief that if stored in a sacred place it will weaken the demon. Mia’s appreciation at finally being believed is palpable, yet the Father’s attempts to bring the doll onto sacred ground is futile. He is violently ejected from the church as the spectre of Annabelle Higgins watches, his body thrown to the floor, he is left lying in a pool of his own blood. Alone and growing increasingly desperate, Mia pledges to sacrifice herself to save her new-born child, and thus becomes an active rather than passive energy in her own haunting. Asserting that her soul instead be taken, declaring that “mommy’s coming to save you,”<sup>1177</sup> Mia heads to the window, cradling the Annabelle doll in her arms, ready to jump to her death. At the last moment, another mother fills Mia’s place, jumping to her death to make amends for mistakenly killing her daughter. Fast forward six months and the whereabouts of the Annabelle doll is unknown. Father Perez’s assertion that “evil is constant. You cannot destroy what was never created,”<sup>1178</sup> prophesies the doll’s inevitable return, and foreshadows the otherworldly events that follow in subsequent instalments of *The Conjuring* universe.

The prologue of *Annabelle* underscores both the significance of the doll figure within the narrative, and their cultural importance more broadly: “since the beginning of civilization, dolls have been beloved by children, cherished by collectors and used in religious rites as conduits for good and evil.”<sup>1179</sup> This opening scene, as per *The Conjuring*, showcases desperate clients recalling

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<sup>1176</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

<sup>1177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1179</sup> Ibid.

to the Warrens their peculiar experiences with the purportedly haunted Annabelle doll, and asking for their assistance to “rid the world of this inhuman spirit.”<sup>1180</sup> Despite being largely absent from the main events of the film the Warrens’ bookend the narrative. As Mee highlights, “Ed and Lorraine form the universe’s center, even when they are not present in its installments. As protagonists in *The Conjuring* films, their relationship and work provides a steady anchor around which the action takes place.”<sup>1181</sup> Fiction is merged with reality in the closing scene which confirms the doll’s transportation to the Warrens’ museum. By starting and concluding *Annabelle* with these narrative threads that align with reality, Leonetti infers to the viewer that the principal storyline is also largely based on real-life events, thus legitimizing it. *Annabelle* concludes with a quote from Lorraine, stating that “the threat of evil is ever present [...] we can contain it as long as we stay vigilant, but it can never truly be destroyed.”<sup>1182</sup> This stresses the possibility of the doll inflicting further anarchy.

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<sup>1180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1181</sup> Mee, “Conjuring a Universe,” 12-13.

<sup>1182</sup> Leonetti, *Annabelle*.

### (In)Human Origins: David F. Sandberg's *Annabelle: Creation*

A sequel to *Annabelle* was announced in 2015, David F. Sandberg replaced Leonetti as director of the project in 2016, and *Annabelle: Creation*, the fourth chapter in *The Conjuring* universe, was released in 2017. Sandberg had previously praised the franchise, particularly *The Conjuring*, for its “classic, old-school horror”<sup>1183</sup> style and drew inspiration from this with *Annabelle: Creation*. Set a decade prior to the events of *Annabelle*, it functions primarily as an origin story for the eponymous doll and once again places it centre stage. Twelve years after tragically losing their seven-year-old daughter Annabelle, nicknamed ‘Bee’, in a road accident, doll-maker Samuel Mullins (Anthony LaPaglia) and his wife Esther (Miranda Otto) welcome six orphaned girls and their custodian Sister Charlotte (Stephanie Sigman) into their rural home. One of the orphans, Janice (Talitha Bateman) is drawn into the daughter’s “forbidden bedroom and unlocks the closet where a (now) familiar doll sits quietly, just waiting to be released into the world again”<sup>1184</sup> and to wreak havoc.

The release of *Annabelle: Creation* took *The Conjuring* franchise over the \$1 billion mark,<sup>1185</sup> a significant achievement, that to date, only three other horror series, *Alien* (1979-2017),<sup>1186</sup> *Resident Evil* (2002-2016),<sup>1187</sup> and *Saw* (2004-2021),<sup>1188</sup> have equalled. Sandberg’s prequel garnered largely positive reviews from audiences as “another strong chapter” in *The Conjuring* universe which

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<sup>1183</sup> Nick Banks, “‘Annabelle: Creation’ Director David F. Sandberg: The Horror News Network Interview,” Horror News Network, August 7, 2017, <https://www.horrornewsnetwork.net/annabelle-creation-director-david-f-sandberg-horror-news-network-interview/>.

<sup>1184</sup> Anton Bitel, “Annabelle: Creation,” *Sight and Sound* 27:9 (September 2017): 58.

<sup>1185</sup> On its opening weekend *Annabelle: Creation* grossed \$35,006,404. – “Annabelle: Creation,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt5140878/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=annabelle%20crea](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt5140878/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=annabelle%20crea).

<sup>1186</sup> *Alien* (1979) grossed \$106,285,522 in box office takings worldwide with its five sequels grossing an additional \$1,096,497,047. – “Alien,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0078748/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=alien](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0078748/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=alien).

<sup>1187</sup> *Resident Evil* (2002) grossed \$102,984,862 in box office takings worldwide with its five sequels grossing an additional \$1,129,690,567. – “Resident Evil,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0120804/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=resident%20evil](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0120804/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=resident%20evil).

<sup>1188</sup> *Saw* (2004) grossed \$103,911,669 in box office takings worldwide with its eight sequels grossing an additional \$913,797,114. – “Saw,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0387564/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=saw](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0387564/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=saw).

provided “further proof that freaky-looking dolls remain reliably terrifying.”<sup>1189</sup> William Bibbiani judged it “a rollercoaster of a horror movie, a scary and surprising crowd-pleaser that finally does the creepy doll proud.”<sup>1190</sup> Comparison to *The Conjuring* is surely inescapable; Chris Hewitt observed that while *Annabelle: Creation* “can't hold a flickering candle to the James Wan–directed entries in the series,” it still has “plenty of decent shocks, and the odd genuine surprise, up its sleeve.”<sup>1191</sup> Conversely Chris Nashawaty deemed the prequel an unoriginal “mishmash of clichés and nonsense” of which nothing “will seem new to horror fans.”<sup>1192</sup> Anton Bitel likewise condemned its lack of originality, noting that “sequels tend to move forwards, but with *Annabelle* [...] it seems the only way is backwards” for the film “has literally nowhere to go beyond dovetailing neatly into an already prescribed future.”<sup>1193</sup>

This future, that of *Annabelle's* opening sequence, like that of *The Conjuring*, is reached through a succession of final acts which showcase how the missing child Janice, now going by the name *Annabelle* and living at an orphanage, is introduced to Mr and Mrs Higgins as a prospective adoptee. The Higginses are warned that *Annabelle* has a somewhat troubled past. Hoping to win her favour they present the girl with a Raggedy Ann doll as Mrs Higgins jests “I hope you like dolls.”<sup>1194</sup> Through this nod to the folklore surrounding the original doll, Sandberg merges fiction with supposed fact, and thus references the real-life connections that are, in this instalment of *The Conjuring* universe, unlike previous entries, not made explicit through an accompanying ‘based on real life’ tagline.<sup>1195</sup> In the final scene of *Annabelle: Creation* a now adult *Annabelle* and boyfriend

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<sup>1189</sup> “*Annabelle: Creation*,” The Reel Place, accessed November 11, 2022,

<https://www.thereelplace.com/movie/annabelle-creation/>.

<sup>1190</sup> William Bibbiani, “The *Conjuring*’ Movies Ranked, From Worst to Best,” The Wrap, June 7, 2021,

<https://www.thewrap.com/the-conjuring-movies-ranked-worst-best-annabelle-nun-devil/>.

<sup>1191</sup> Chris Hewitt, “*Annabelle: Creation* Review,” Empire, August 8, 2018,

<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/annabelle-creation-review/>.

<sup>1192</sup> Chris Nashawaty, “*Annabelle: Creation* is a mishmash of clichés and nonsense: EW review,” Entertainment Weekly, August 11, 2017, <https://ew.com/movies/2017/08/11/annabelle-creation-ew-review/>.

<sup>1193</sup> Bitel, “*Annabelle: Creation*,” 58.

<sup>1194</sup> *Annabelle: Creation*, directed by David F. Sandberg, performances by Anthony LaPaglia, Samara Lee, and Miranda Otto (2017; Burbank, CA: New Line Cinema), DVD.

<sup>1195</sup> *Annabelle Comes Home* likewise does not rely on this tagline in its promotional content.

invade the home of her adoptive parents, awakening neighbour Mia, and thus enabling her to witness the carnage that ensues. This detailing of the intrusion, this time partly viewed from the parents' perspective, plugs gaps in both *The Conjuring* and *Annabelle's* opening. Furthermore, through this connection, as well as the allusion to *The Nun* in its post-credit scene, as Bitel observes, "Sandberg's film situates itself as a creation myth for a shared horror-fiction world,"<sup>1196</sup> one with a supernatural focus, that rivals Warner Bros.'s MonsterVerse.<sup>1197</sup>

*Annabelle: Creation* begins with a deftly crafted, disconcerting sequence, which showcases artisan Samuel Mullins silently constructing the titular doll in his studio. The uncanniness of the doll figure is adeptly highlighted here, the workshop is filled with yet to be assembled artificial bodies, and attention is drawn to the titular doll's detached, eerily empty – for it has no eyes, nor makeup to define its features – head. Once complete, Samuel brands the doll; Annabelle is the first of one hundred expected replicas,<sup>1198</sup> a limited-edition creation from an artist that guarantees the "finest handcrafted dolls."<sup>1199</sup> The Mullins are presented to the viewer as an archetypal 1950s American Christian family, and as Neil Gravino notes, it is this faith that "forms the backbone of the movie's backstory, as the parents [...] pray to see Annabelle again after her untimely death, beginning the hauntings revolving around the Annabelle doll."<sup>1200</sup> Bereft at the loss of their daughter the despairing parents "prayed and promised [...] [their] devotion to whatever power would allow [...] [them] to speak or see [...] [their] beloved girl again."<sup>1201</sup> Shortly afterwards something, which they naively deduce is their daughter, begins to make itself known around the

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<sup>1196</sup> Bitel, "Annabelle: Creation," 58.

<sup>1197</sup> The MonsterVerse is an ongoing American film and television franchise that showcases monster characters owned and created by Japanese entertainment company Toho. To date the entries into the MonsterVerse are *Godzilla* (2014), *Kong: Skull Island* (2017), *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021), and *Skull Island* (2023).

<sup>1198</sup> Presumably production was stopped after one.

<sup>1199</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.

<sup>1200</sup> Neil Gravino, "The Christian Worldview of Annabelle Creation," Horror Homeroom, August 11, 2020, [HTTPS://WWW.HORRORHOMEROOM.COM/THE-CHRISTIAN-WORLDVIEW-OF-ANNABELLE-CREATION/](https://www.horrorhomeroom.com/the-christian-worldview-of-annabelle-creation/).

<sup>1201</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.



house. The entity, which they cannot yet fully perceive or embrace, asks for “permission to move into the doll so she could be with [...] [them] forever.”<sup>1202</sup> They agree and “that’s when it became stronger,”<sup>1203</sup> and they were able to catch fleeting glimpses of their revenant child. Yet they “soon realized it wasn’t [...] [their] Annabelle at all,” but a “demonic presence” that exploited the dead child to manipulate them “into giving it a soul it could inhabit.”<sup>1204</sup> It is the Mullins’ faith that ultimately fuels the macabre animation of the inanimate object, turning it from lifeless doll into demonic idol.

The evil entity in *Annabelle: Creation* focuses its attention on the most vulnerable character,<sup>1205</sup> both in terms of health and age, as the demonic figure possesses Janice, a disabled minor. Set just before the breakthrough polio vaccination was discovered, *Annabelle: Creation* shows Janice as afflicted with polio, unable to move unaided, her leg is strapped and she walks with the aid of a crutch.<sup>1206</sup> Thus, the demonic threat here, as Shastri Akella observes, chooses a victim “whose sense of power, shaky at best (given their corporeal, psychological, and social circumstances) is easy to upend.”<sup>1207</sup> Furthermore, in *Annabelle: Creation* the demonic threat utilizes the spirit of another vulnerable young girl, the Mullins’ dead daughter, to infiltrate both the grief-stricken household, and the vulnerable body of Janice.

This evil entity, “after colonizing the body of its victim, engages the senses of the latter to exercise its power.”<sup>1208</sup> Janice, after being enticed into the illicit sphere of Annabelle’s childhood

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<sup>1202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1205</sup> The same is also true of the *The Conjuring 2*.

<sup>1206</sup> In 1949 John Enders, Thomas Weller, and Frederick Robbins successfully cultivated poliovirus in human tissue. This revolutionary research at Boston Children’s Hospital earned the scientists a Nobel Prize in 1954. Physician Jonas Salk subsequently created the first successful vaccine which was licensed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1955.

<sup>1207</sup> Shastri Akella, “Occupy and Replace: A Migratory Reading of Possession in *The Conjuring 2* and *Annabelle: Creation*”, in *The Cinema of James Wan: Critical Essays*, eds. Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Matthew Edwards (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2022), 33.

<sup>1208</sup> Ibid.

bedroom is physically violated. She attempts to flee with the assistance of an antiquated stairlift, but something drags her back. She is then ejected from the chair and seemingly briefly levitates before her rag doll-esque broken, bloodied, limp body crashes to the floor. Upon her return from hospital, and now confined to a wheelchair with the distinct probability that she may never walk again, Janice insists that the orphans “can’t stay here. We need to leave.”<sup>1209</sup> Yet they have nowhere else to go. Janice insists to Sister Charlotte that it was no mere accident, for “something threw me,” confiding in her that “in this house I feel a different kind of presence [...] an evil one.”<sup>1210</sup> She believes this presence is “coming after me, my soul [...] because I’m the weakest.”<sup>1211</sup> This acknowledgement of her own vulnerability is significant, yet is immediately rebuffed by Sister Charlotte who insists that “the devil prays on those weak of soul not weak of flesh or bone.”<sup>1212</sup>

The horror genre is replete with narratives “of families where the cracks, whose causation remains unaddressed, serves as the gateway for the demoniac: secrets never communicated, conflicts never resolved, infidelity never addressed.”<sup>1213</sup> As Akella, when commenting on this trend in the genre, detects, “if unhappiness and anxiety give the demoniac an entry point, in order for it to thrive, those conditions must persist.”<sup>1214</sup> In the case of *Annabelle: Creation* these conditions positively flourish. The possession here “begins with a violation of geography”<sup>1215</sup> as the orphaned girls, whose previous home unexpectedly closed, are granted refuge by the Mullins under the proviso that there are two spaces within the house they are forbidden to enter. It concludes with possession of Janice’s disabled body as the malicious entity, not content with inflicting grievous bodily harm, aggressively drags her broken form across the house and grounds until she is so severely weakened that complete possession is possible. Possession in *Annabelle: Creation* then, as

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<sup>1209</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.

<sup>1210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1213</sup> Akella, “Occupy and Replace,” 31.

<sup>1214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1215</sup> Ibid, 33.

Akella proposes, functions as both a territorial act, “over the geography of the house and the body” and an act “of need: the demoniac extending the host family’s anxiety, potentially to an indefinite point, so the conditions necessary for it to thrive persist,”<sup>1216</sup> thus establishing an open and ready gateway for demonic infiltration.

The first of these restricted spaces is the Mullins’ bedroom. Upon arrival the orphans are informed that they are unlikely to see Mrs Mullins, for she “has a condition”<sup>1217</sup> the product of a mysterious terrible accident that happened some twelve years prior to their arrival. Mrs Mullins in the great Gothic tradition of Bertha Mason, is a confined woman, seemingly bedbound, relying on others to answer her bellringing calls for assistance. In the absence of clear facts, an invented mythology soon follows her. The older girls whisper amongst themselves inventing otherworldly tales in which Mrs Mullins possesses supernatural capabilities, like Candyman “to get you to look she’ll keep saying your name,” like Medusa “if you look directly at her you’ll die,” like Dracula “nighttime is when she gets her powers.”<sup>1218</sup> They reason that she must remain indoors to build her strength, something necessary so that “she can feed.”<sup>1219</sup> These ghostly tales, relayed to one another at night, under a sheet, with only the light of a torch, readily serve as nightmare fuel for the scared girls. Furthermore, by presenting Mrs Mullins as a terrifying amalgamation of a whole host of Gothic monsters, she is othered, not due to her disability, rather, as a result of the fear that this unknown provokes.

This mythology is fueled by the porcelain half-mask Mrs Mullins wears which was expertly crafted by her husband to hide the resulting disfigurement from a previous confrontation with the malevolent doll. The orphans upon catching a glimpse of her, determine that “she looks like a

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<sup>1216</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>1217</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.

<sup>1218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1219</sup> Ibid.

doll.”<sup>1220</sup> Mrs Mullins then is positioned as the real ‘living’ doll of *Annabelle: Creation*, one that haunts the house, and terrifies its inhabitants. Yet, it is not a human horror that haunts the halls of the house, but a much more abstract threat. This ghost story session ends abruptly when a creaking figure appears, outlined against the sheet, insistently ringing a bell, the noise increasing as it approaches. As a white half-masked face jerks the sheet off them, the girls scream. Mr Mullins’ adamantly dismisses the suggestion of his wife’s involvement, “that’s impossible, my wife hasn’t been able to walk for years,”<sup>1221</sup> thus condemning their childish tales.

The second of these restricted spaces is Annabelle’s childhood bedroom. Seemingly untouched since her untimely death, it serves as a macabre in-house memorial to the Mullins’ loss. A breadcrumb trail of “find me”<sup>1222</sup> notes scrawled in childlike handwriting, mirroring those found in the original tale, entice Janice into this forbidden room. She “is lured into Annabelle’s room by the supernatural force that eventually possesses her: the door to the room becomes unlocked of its volition and the gramophone starts to automatically play an old tune, thus stoking her childish curiosity, an instinct which also nudges her to explore the room.”<sup>1223</sup> Inside the room toys litter the floor, as if abandoned halfway through play, and a replica Punch and Judy theatre sits alongside an exquisitely crafted, perfect replica of the Mullins’ house. Presently Janice unlocks the solitary sealed cupboard within the room, reveals the titular Annabelle doll within, and thus inadvertently liberates it from its internment. Suspicious of her discovery Janice throws a sheet over the doll and slams the door, yet once freed its inhabitant cannot be so easily contained. The freed doll brings forth a demonic entity that first presents itself as the Mullins’ departed daughter. The seemingly innocuous child asks the youthful intruder for her help. In response Janice timidly asks, “what do you want?”<sup>1224</sup> The entity, now transformed into a hellish bloodied fully-grown anthropomorphic

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<sup>1220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1223</sup> Akella, “Occupy and Replace,” 33.

<sup>1224</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.

iteration of Annabelle, lunges at Janice avowing “I want your soul.”<sup>1225</sup> This scene represents one of Sandberg’s more successful scares as it skilfully utilises, to full effect, the uncanny form and manipulability of the titular doll. Once possessed Annabelle and Janice become somewhat transposable, able to take the place of one other, existing as “temporal and spiritual fusions.”<sup>1226</sup> This being, as Akella contends, exists “outside the construct of human time, even as [...] [it communicates] through the corporeality of [...] [its] human host [...] that is temporally bound.”<sup>1227</sup> Janice’s unaffected speech marks her out as unchanged, yet the other girls’ observation that “she can walk”<sup>1228</sup> again, underlines the bodily marker of her difference post-possession.

The demonic activity within the household is not restricted to one act of possession, rather it appears to permeate the seemingly everyday objects that fill the house. Emily Yoshida commends the authenticity of Sandberg’s “richly detailed and lovingly filmed” mid-century period piece noting that “the dusty old country house where the majority of the film’s action takes place feels like as much of a real, time-worn place as it does a soon-to-be terror trap.”<sup>1229</sup> Yet, she goes on to argue that as the film progresses, the “multiple threads of different girls getting scared in different rooms in the house started to feel rhythmically unfocused.”<sup>1230</sup> At times, this approach may arguably verge on clichéd, yet as Bitel reasons each of these “set pieces is played out to admirably well-crafted perfection”<sup>1231</sup> within *Annabelle: Creation*. This unrelenting approach simply amplifies the monstrosity, bombarding the viewer with horror after horror, that rather than diminishing the shock, unequivocally refuses to grant the viewer any space to breathe.

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<sup>1225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1226</sup> Akella, “Occupy and Replace,” 33.

<sup>1227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1228</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.

<sup>1229</sup> Emily Yoshida, “*Annabelle: Creation* Proves That Slower Isn’t Always Better in Horror,” *Vulture*, August 11, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/08/annabelle-creation-movie-review.html>.

<sup>1230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1231</sup> Bitel, “*Annabelle: Creation*,” 58.

In archetypal haunted house style, the property appears to come alive: floorboards creak; doors swing open; and light switches turn on and off of their own accord. These eerie occurrences are only deepened in the prohibited areas of the house. Janice's awakening by a gramophone playing 'You are my Sunshine,' a favoured record of the Mullins', leads to her initial intrusion into their daughter's forbidden room.<sup>1232</sup> She is thus the "the first victim of classic haunted house antics."<sup>1233</sup> From then on the device recurrently plays of its own accord, and as Pagnoni Berns and Edwards observe, "this song punctuates the film, becoming more and more frequent as [...] [Janice's] life is placed in deeper and deeper peril."<sup>1234</sup> Furthermore, this supernatural force that animates the inanimate transforms the house into something of a Lovecraftian eldritch space, one that is "weird, ghostly, unnatural, frightful, hideous."<sup>1235</sup> This space, while technically situated on earth does not submit to known laws of physics and thus constitutes a "weird geography."<sup>1236</sup>

In addition to the titular doll, *Annabelle: Creation*, endeavours to induce automatonophobia in its audience through the presence of self-animating Punch and Judy puppets, alongside an especially ominous scarecrow.<sup>1237</sup> The orphans, when first exploring the property's surrounding grounds, determine, after venturing into one semi-abandoned barn and getting startled by the scarecrow that inhabits it, that "this place is so creepy."<sup>1238</sup> Exploiting this, one of the girls later employs the scarecrow to frighten the others, animating its lifeless limbs to mimic humanity. This, perhaps inevitably given the genre, later comes back to haunt them. In the stalk and slash finale of *Annabelle: Creation* the girls are forced to battle against this same scarecrow, who now seemingly possessed for real, is intent on blocking their escape.

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<sup>1232</sup> Similarly, a record player eerily turns on of its own volition in *Annabelle Comes Home*.

<sup>1233</sup> Pagnoni Berns and Edwards, "Introduction," 18.

<sup>1234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1235</sup> "Eldritch, *adj.*," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed July 15, 2023, <https://www-oed-com.hull.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/60208?redirectedFrom=eldritch#eid>.

<sup>1236</sup> James Kneale, "Ghoulis Dialogues: H. P. Lovecraft's Weird Geographies," in *The Age of Lovecraft*, eds. Carl H Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 44.

<sup>1237</sup> Automatonophobia is the fear (phobia) of animatronics, automatons, dummies, mannequins, wax figures, and other human-like entities.

<sup>1238</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.

The Mullins, through granting permission to the demon to transfer into the Annabelle doll, are responsible for the demonic doppelgänger that follows. The consequences of this blasphemy plays out as they each meet, as anticipated, a gruesome death. Samuel is unable to keep the demon at bay with his self-fashioned crucifix. It first prises the cross from his hand, snapping his bones, before enacting fatal harm upon the defenceless man. Esther, whose previous attack by the demon prompted Annabelle's confinement, "meets her end with her body horizontally bisected, the top half crucified to her wall."<sup>1239</sup> Their deaths mock their volatile faith, as their opening up of their home to the orphans is exposed to be a futile, and ultimately doomed, attempt at repenting for their sins. The demon then attempts to attack Sister Charlotte but is thwarted, her steadfast dedication to her faith seemingly providing defence against otherworldly demonic threats. The Sister forces both the doll and the possessed Janice back into the cupboard from which it was freed, pleads for spiritual mercy, and bars the door. Here religious authority is utilised to lock the doll away, ostensibly preventing it from wreaking further havoc. This entrapment is accompanied by the sound of Janice's screams, which are at first childlike, yet quickly become more demonic as the hellish entity merges child with demon, sacrificing the former to the latter. Synchronously the house erupts in a brief cacophony of eerie animation: furniture rattles and flies through the air, lights blink rapidly on and off, and distorted slices of 'You are my Sunshine' resonate through the house, before total darkness and absolute silence finally descend. The following day police arrive to investigate and find only the doll left within the confines of the cupboard, there is "still no sign of the girl."<sup>1240</sup> A priest is summoned to cleanse the house. He reassures the remaining orphaned girls and their carer that "whatever evil was here is no longer here" and as such "now the doll is just a doll."<sup>1241</sup> This particular doll however, if cinematic and mythic history is anything to go by, should perhaps not be so easily dismissed.

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<sup>1239</sup> Gravino, "The Christian Worldview of Annabelle Creation."

<sup>1240</sup> Sandberg, *Annabelle: Creation*.

<sup>1241</sup> *Ibid.*

## Housing the Demonic: Gary Dauberman's *Annabelle Comes Home*

*Annabelle Comes Home*, the third instalment of the Annabelle centred trilogy, is dedicated to Lorraine.<sup>1242</sup> A co-written project between Gary Dauberman and James Wan, the film's premise was pitched by Wan as “*Night at the Museum with Annabelle.*”<sup>1243</sup> Its title is taken directly from a line of Annabelle's journal shown in *Annabelle: Creation*, further reinforcing links between the two films. *Annabelle Comes Home* opens with the Warrens salvaging the malevolent doll from its reluctant owners and resettling it in their personal museum, an “Arkham Asylum-like repository of conquered foes”<sup>1244</sup> for safekeeping. When the Warrens are called away on urgent business, leaving their daughter, Judy (Mckenna Grace) in the care of two naïve teenagers, Mary Ellen (Madison Iseman) and Daniela (Katie Sarife), the doll is inadvertently freed from its imprisonment, bringing with it the spirit of Annabelle Mullins. This entity, the demon Malthus, utilises the doll as it “seeks a ‘home’ – a human body to possess and use.”<sup>1245</sup> Annabelle “a focus for evil spirits that seek to claim the souls of others [...] promptly marshals an array of other apparitions”<sup>1246</sup> to assist its cause, and expectedly, chaos swiftly ensues.

Upon its theatrical release in 2019 *Annabelle Comes Home* debuted with the lowest box-office achievement of the franchise to date,<sup>1247</sup> and critical reception to Dauberman's directorial debut

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<sup>1242</sup> Lorraine died on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2019, two months before *Annabelle Comes Home* was released. In another blurring of reality and fiction a close-up shot of Vera Farmiga as Lorraine Warren abruptly switches to a black and white family photo of the real Lorraine, accompanied by an ‘in loving memory’ dedication.

<sup>1243</sup> Crow, “Annabelle 3 Confirmed, Set in Warren House.”

<sup>1244</sup> Kim Newman, “Annabelle Comes Home Review: Magical Middle-School Doll Horror,” BFI, July 17, 2019, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/annabelle-comes-home-doll-conjuring-universe>.

<sup>1245</sup> Wetmore, *The Conjuring*, 98.

<sup>1246</sup> Newman, “Annabelle Comes Home Review.”

<sup>1247</sup> *The Conjuring* grossed \$320,406,242 in box office takings worldwide – IMDB, “The Conjuring.” *Annabelle* grossed \$257,589,721 – IMDB, “Annabelle.” *The Conjuring 2* grossed \$321,834,351 – “The Conjuring 2,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt3065204/?ref=search\\_search\\_search\\_result\\_1](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt3065204/?ref=search_search_search_result_1). *Annabelle: Creation* grossed \$306,515,884 – IMDB, “Annabelle: Creation.” *The Nun* grossed \$365,582,797 – “The Nun,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt5814060/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=the%20nun](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt5814060/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=the%20nun). In comparison *Annabelle Comes Home* grossed \$231,252,591 globally – “Annabelle Comes Home,” IMDB, accessed July 4, 2023, [https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt8350360/?ref=instant\\_tt\\_1&q=annabelle%20comes](https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt8350360/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=annabelle%20comes).



was largely negative. David Fear deemed it “a back-to-basics take on the ghost-story gauntlet run” that is “worth its weight in spare doll parts.”<sup>1248</sup> Dauberman’s choice to showcase a seemingly ceaseless stream of monsters garnered the most criticism, with Wetmore judging it a “a shameless franchise-stuffer” which “delivers an abundance of haunted-house cliches and few genuine scares.”<sup>1249</sup> Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez deemed it “a relentless but awkward throw-everything-at-the-viewer occult thriller that mixes ghosts, looming spirits, and – yes – inanimate scary objects coming to life” noting that as such, *Annabelle* is “not so much at the scary center of the action as existing alongside it.”<sup>1250</sup> In contrast, Kim Newman praised its “emphasis on grief and anxiety rather than out-and-out bloodshed.”<sup>1251</sup> Indeed, *Annabelle Comes Home* has a remarkably low murder count for horror, zero, and it is for this reason that Newman judged it “middle-school horror in its near-perfect form.”<sup>1252</sup>

Echoing the opening sequences of both *The Conjuring* and *Annabelle*, *Annabelle Comes Home* begins with the Warrens seizing the demonic doll from two nurses who are troubled by its increasingly active behaviour. Lorraine explains to the two that the demonic spirit residing within the doll “wanted to get inside of you”<sup>1253</sup> and it is due to this that “the doll will need to be properly cared for.”<sup>1254</sup> They are outraged, “cared for? It should be destroyed” yet, Lorraine is quick to point out that “that would only make things worse” and as such reiterates that they will “keep it somewhere safe”<sup>1255</sup> instead. Significantly, in this pre-credit scene, the audience also discovers that *Annabelle* is not merely a demonic conduit but is also “a

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<sup>1248</sup> David Fear, “‘Annabelle Comes Home’ Review: Hello, Evil-Hellspawn Dolly!” *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 2019, [HTTPS://WWW.ROLLINGSTONE.COM/TV-MOVIES/TV-MOVIE-REVIEWS/ANNABELLE-COMES-HOME-MOVIE-REVIEW-851030/](https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-reviews/annabelle-comes-home-movie-review-851030/).

<sup>1249</sup> Wetmore, *The Conjuring*, 98.

<sup>1250</sup> Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary American Horror* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 115.

<sup>1251</sup> Newman, “Annabelle Comes Home Review.”

<sup>1252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>1253</sup> *Annabelle Comes Home*, directed by Gary Dauberman, performances by Vera Farmiga, Patrick Wilson, McKenna Grace, and Madison Iseman (2019; Burbank, CA: New Line Cinema), DVD.

<sup>1254</sup> Dauberman, *Annabelle Comes Home*.

<sup>1255</sup> *Ibid.*

beacon for other spirits.”<sup>1256</sup> Put another way Annabelle’s very existence summons comparable paranormal objects.

These supernatural entities converge on the Warrens during their drive home with Annabelle. The bloodied ghost of a recently deceased child appears behind Lorraine eerily whispering, “I like your doll,”<sup>1257</sup> while the ghostly inhabitants of a nearby graveyard descend on Ed, pushing him into the path of oncoming traffic. Once home the Warrens determine that in addition to a church blessing, they “need another barrier of protection, a holy one”<sup>1258</sup> and using chapel glass build a case to house the doll. Once Annabelle is enclosed, the room immediately appears to quieten. In response to Ed querying their success, Lorraine asserts that “the evil is contained” yet is quick to remind him that “those are not the same thing.”<sup>1259</sup>

*Annabelle Comes Home* reiterates the scale and importance of the Warrens’ collection as onscreen scrolling text informs the viewer that “the Warren Artifact Room holds the world’s largest private collection of haunted and cursed objects. Due to the extreme evil contained within, the Warrens have the room blessed weekly. While every object has its own unique and terrifying history, there is one artefact the Warrens deem more malevolent than any other.”<sup>1260</sup> It is with this particular object’s story that the film is principally concerned. Despite the events of *Annabelle Comes Home* predominantly taking place on their property, the Warrens are notably absent for much of the film, yet their history guides the central narrative. A fictional newspaper headline assessing them as either “heroes or hoax”<sup>1261</sup> imitates the real-life controversy that their work attracted. Likewise, the Warrens’ local celebrity status is referenced through Judy’s peers quizzing her about

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<sup>1256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1261</sup> Ibid.

her parents' work: "don't your parents keep any stuff around? No. they keep it all locked away in a room. Can we at least go and look?"<sup>1262</sup> It is expected that such macabre work requires ghoulish surroundings akin to the haunted houses of horror tradition: "is it all creepy music and cobwebs? Have you ever seen anything scary over there? Like a ghost?"<sup>1263</sup> The true horror resides instead in "boring suburbia."<sup>1264</sup> As such, *Annabelle Comes Home* belongs to the subgenre of suburban Gothic, an area that Bernice M. Murphy identifies as being principally concerned "with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighbourhood, or house, or family, has something to hide, and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident."<sup>1265</sup> The Warrens' home is thus construed as a site of sinister activity from the off.

The Warrens' artefact room is the locus of fear in *Annabelle Comes Home*. It is a forbidden space, that Judy cautions is "not really good for anyone to go in"<sup>1266</sup> and as such, is irresistible to Daniela. Despite the clear warning, "don't snoop, don't touch, don't do anything,"<sup>1267</sup> she breaks in. Once inside she taps, touches, plays, opens, and handles the eccentric items which crowd every bit of available surface, wall, and floor space. Drawn to Annabelle, she enquires "what'd you do to get in there?"<sup>1268</sup> tapping the doll's glass case. This instance of adolescent recklessness, a characteristic catalyst of the horror genre, escalates as Daniela mistakenly frees both Annabelle from its glass prison and the assorted horrors that surround it.

Everything that resides within that room, has been amassed by the Warrens through their work, and "is either haunted or cursed or used in some ritualistic practice."<sup>1269</sup> Drawing from the

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<sup>1262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1265</sup> Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

<sup>1266</sup> Dauberman, *Annabelle Comes Home*.

<sup>1267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1269</sup> Ibid.

multitude of varied evils recorded in the Warrens' innumerable paranormal case files, it houses, amongst other demonic entities, the music box from *The Conjuring*, the zoetrope from *The Conjuring 2*, and the ritual cup from *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*. These nods to both the other films in the franchise, and the Warrens' private collection, further blur boundaries between reality and fiction, whilst underscoring the interwoven nature of *The Conjuring* universe. In *Annabelle Comes Home* glimpses of the Warrens' cases are shown not only through the presence of these objects, but through the girls' engagement with projector footage purportedly filmed during their work and with the detailed case files archived in their office. The showcasing of this footage and these files which reference, amongst other items, the ferryman's coins, mourning bracelet, and haunted wedding dress, shrewdly platforms additional aspects of the Warrens' case history, which, when presented through the frame of 'real life' relic, substantiates these cases.

Once freed, Annabelle's role as beacon animates the objects within the room, bringing to life horrors that traumatise the inhabitants of the house. These terrors include: an eerie wedding dress that "turns the wearer violent and primitive;"<sup>1270</sup> a ghostly lycanthrope that stalks the grounds; a haunted television that showcases an illusory near future; and a set of cursed samurai armour that is possessed by the malevolent spirit of its former wearer. Annabelle also brings forth a corpse-like spirit with coins covering his eyes, "if you don't pay his toll, he'll take your soul,"<sup>1271</sup> an evident allusion to Charon, the ferryman of Greek mythology who transports the dead. The sheer scale of monstrosities present in *Annabelle Comes Home* disrupts the previously established series pattern of one main antagonist per film. Furthermore, the abundant horrors showcased in *Annabelle Comes Home* contrast with the other Annabelle focused narratives in which the demonic doll takes centre stage. As Newman discerns, Dauberman however stages these "shudders and shocks with some imagination [...] and enough ferocity to cover the fact that this is going to be all stalk and no slash."<sup>1272</sup> Eljaiek-Rodríguez likewise reads *Annabelle Comes Home* as

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<sup>1270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1272</sup> Newman, "Annabelle Comes Home Review."

a baroque horror production, which “uses an overload of horrifying characters to saturate the viewer, preventing any alleviation of the narrative tension.”<sup>1273</sup> Indeed, at points the excess on display verges on too much, disconnecting it in tone from earlier installments, and verging into parody. As Owen Gleiberman jests, *Annabelle Comes Home* “looks like a horror film, but it’s really the horror equivalent of speed dating.”<sup>1274</sup> These multitudinous horrors are never fully developed, arguably paving the way for further cinematic installments. As such, Eljaiek-Rodríguez perceives the film “as a toy box from which the directors and producers of *The Conjuring* franchise randomly plan to draw characters for future films,”<sup>1275</sup> with certain sequences of *Annabelle Comes Home* serving, Newman suggests, “as potential audition pieces for future *Conjuring* add-ons.”<sup>1276</sup>

The dynamic nature of these monstrosities, they lunge, chase, and attack, both contrast with the stillness of the doll itself and by proxy extend its agency. The demonic threat is no longer confined within one porcelain body, it is now multidimensional. In contrast the doll’s movements are limited, glimpses of its apparent relocation are snatched, as it appears under furniture or through doorways, only to disappear again. Mary Ellen upon finding the doll next to a sleeping Judy is unfazed, seemingly unaware at this point of the threat it poses. Her presence appears to awaken the doll, resulting in surely one of *Annabelle Comes Home*’s most frightening scenes, as Judy is awoken by a sheet-clad, creaking figure, stealthily moving towards her, its ghostly form aesthetically mirroring the demonic threat of *Annabelle: Creation*. This terror, a hybrid of human, demon, and doll, lunges at Judy, as the shadow of the Annabelle doll appears behind it.

Judy, it is suggested, has inherited some of her mother’s psychic prowess, and it is this trait that enables her to sense that a possession has taken place after the inhuman spirit moves into

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<sup>1273</sup> Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary American Horror*, 115.

<sup>1274</sup> Owen Gleiberman, “Film Review: *Annabelle Comes Home*,” *Variety*, June 24, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/annabelle-comes-home-review-1203251355/>.

<sup>1275</sup> Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary American Horror*, 115.

<sup>1276</sup> Newman, “*Annabelle Comes Home* Review.”

Daniela: “that’s not Daniela. Something has a hold of her. I can feel it.”<sup>1277</sup> Judy then is a prototypical gifted child of horror. Despite initially hiding her ghostly visions due to a fear of not being believed, she later confides in Mary Ellen that “sometimes I see things. Like how my mum sees things.”<sup>1278</sup> Ultimately, it is this quality that enables her to see what the others cannot, and thus determine that to stop the terror they must “find Annabelle. We have to put her back in the case.”<sup>1279</sup> If they wish for the other spirits to rest, they must first contain the doll. As per *Annabelle: Creation*, Annabelle has seemingly transferred to a locked cupboard, the labyrinthine entrance to which they are guided to by a well-meaning spirit that Judy is able to see. To retrieve the doll, Mary Ellen must navigate this dimly lit maze, slip past the ferryman-like figures that guard it, and take Annabelle from the arms of her malicious doppelgänger. This retrieval of the doll prompts the multifaceted horrors to converge once again upon the girls. Finally reunited the trio struggle to confine the doll within the case as the demon within, now freed, launches itself at Judy, whilst the others brandish crosses in an attempt to fend off the manifold evils that approach under its command.<sup>1280</sup> This religious intervention is successful, and they are able to force the case shut, locking Annabelle within. The disturbances immediately then cease, prompting an anxious Daniela to ask for reassurance, “is it over?”<sup>1281</sup> Judy’s response echoes her mother’s, assuring her that “the evil has been contained.”<sup>1282</sup>

The success of *Annabelle Comes Home* lies in its ability to conjure monsters not purely from abstract horrors, but from a more human one too, grief. Daniela’s intrusion into the Warrens’ artefact room is fuelled by her desire to summon supernatural forces to reconnect with her recently deceased father, for whose death she feels she is to blame. Learning about the Warrens’ research had given her hope that her “darling dad is still out there

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<sup>1277</sup> Dauberman, *Annabelle Comes Home*.

<sup>1278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1280</sup> The demon Malthus “when shown in his infernal form [...] resembles a tall humanoid he-goat – uncannily similar to *Insidious*’s Red-faced demon.” - Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary American Horror*, 111.

<sup>1281</sup> Dauberman, *Annabelle Comes Home*.

<sup>1282</sup> Ibid.

somewhere.”<sup>1283</sup> Upon her first intrusion into the artefact room, she pleads that “if there’s a presence here in this room, please give me a sign”<sup>1284</sup> whilst offering up a photo of the two of them. This effort to establish communication is ostensibly answered by Annabelle, the doll falls forward, and Daniela rushes to move it back, in an attempt to cover her tracks. A well-timed smoke alarm echoes this intrusion as Daniela struggles to keep Annabelle confined.

Mirroring earlier installments, in *Annabelle Comes Home* Daniela is the vulnerable party that the demonic threat is seemingly drawn to. Her later attempt to return the stolen keys results in her being trapped within the room, where the paranormal objects around her appear to awaken and converge upon her. A vintage typewriter manufactures lines of “miss me?”<sup>1285</sup> a homage to both the scrawled notes of previous Annabelle films, and the wider horror tradition in which the film sits.<sup>1286</sup> The blackened screen of an old television set eerily showcases near future events, with Daniela breaking down as she sees her bloodied, corpse-like doppelgänger appear on the screen in front of her after answering a cursed telephone. Her wearing of the Warrens’ mourner’s bracelet invokes the spirit of her father into the room. What at first appears to be a cherished reunion, quickly topples, as his smiling face blurs into that of a malevolent spirit, set on revenge, screaming “you did this to me it’s all your fault.”<sup>1287</sup> Daniela’s guilt is later appeased by Lorraine, who upon communicating with the spirit of her dead father, reassures her that she is forgiven, “he also tells me that he misses you. And to stop being so hard on yourself ‘cause it was not your fault.”<sup>1288</sup> In *Annabelle Comes Home* guilt is the driving force that prompts Daniela to interfere with demonic forces in search of answers, and in doing so, inadvertently “unleash[ing] a demon,”<sup>1289</sup> trapped within the body of the Annabelle doll. Its mission is unchanged from previous instalments,

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<sup>1283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1286</sup> An evident reference to *The Shining*.

<sup>1287</sup> Dauberman, *Annabelle Comes Home*.

<sup>1288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1289</sup> Ibid.

“Annabelle, the doll [...] She wants a soul,”<sup>1290</sup> yet this time they can marshal an army of horrors to aid their cause.

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<sup>1290</sup> Ibid.



## Conclusion

Amongst the malevolent marionettes and killer dolls of cinematic history, Annabelle is notable for its stillness. As Nayman observes, while its forbears “took some exercise once in a while - scuttling under couches and popping out of closets to attack their human owners – Annabelle [...] subscribes to the less-is-more philosophy of haunting. She’s inert, but it’s strategic.”<sup>1291</sup> The doll’s motion is largely limited to occasional subtle movements of the head.<sup>1292</sup> Instead it prefers to occupy others, carrying out its will through unsuspecting hosts,<sup>1293</sup> and purging the susceptible victims of their own autonomy in the process. As Eljaiek-Rodríguez discerns the terror of Annabelle comes instead from its “never-ending grinning and [...] ability to appear and disappear without actually transporting.”<sup>1294</sup> Furthermore, Annabelle’s silence distances it further from the iconic tagline of *Dolls*, “they walk, they talk, they kill”<sup>1295</sup> and thus shrewdly avoids correlation with this arguably outdated cliché. Annabelle remains effectively silent throughout the series, agency is conveyed through messages scrawled on paper, walls, and ceilings, but it never actually speaks. As Susan Yi Sencindiver observes, these traits when taken too far, verge on parody, “it proves harder to elicit an uncanny effect by figuring the living doll and related motifs as an incongruous element threatening to destabilise their given contexts.”<sup>1296</sup> This is something which *The Conjuring* universe successfully evades.

J Halberstam determines that within contemporary horror, “once the monster becomes visible [...] monstrosity becomes less and less recuperable.”<sup>1297</sup> Wan deftly subverts this notion. He presents, in the very opening scene of *The Conjuring*, the Annabelle doll as a palpable demonic

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<sup>1291</sup> Nayman, “Annabelle,” 64.

<sup>1292</sup> In *Annabelle Comes Home* the doll levitates briefly but it is possible to detect Malthus in the background, holding it.

<sup>1293</sup> Or the will of Malthus.

<sup>1294</sup> Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary American Horror*, 113.

<sup>1295</sup> Gordon, *Dolls*.

<sup>1296</sup> Yi Sencindiver, “The Doll’s Uncanny Soul,” 126.

<sup>1297</sup> J Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 39.

threat whose appearance provokes terror. This terror is reclaimed each time the Annabelle doll manifests as a different iteration, whether that is as a seemingly innocuous treasured toy, as the physical embodiment of a lost loved one, as a troubled orphan, or, in its definitive form, as the demon Malthus. Malthus begins by tricking Annabelle Mullins's parents, dishonestly acquiring their permission to move into the doll which it then utilizes to kill them. Later, it possesses Janice, who goes on to murder her parents whilst under its influence, and who upon her death assists the demon in inhabiting the doll. As Eljaiek-Rodríguez argues, "all of these convoluted transpositions (from doll to possess [*sic*] human, and to possess [*sic*] human to doll looking for a new host when the Warrens' 'find' it) makes the narrative more complex and presents a recursive demon that, when expelled from one vessel, moves quickly to another – regardless of whether it is a human being or not."<sup>1298</sup> Through these multifaceted inversions the directors of *The Conjuring* universe craft an ongoing malleable narrative that makes a respectable contribution to the possession horror film subgenre.

Unlike its peers, "Annabelle is neither a sentient doll nor the manifestation of a ventriloquist's id."<sup>1299</sup> The doll exists instead primarily as a conduit, a haunted object that is able to manipulate the people, as well as the objects, around it to do its macabre will. Aesthetically Annabelle is a disturbing creation, distinctly different from its Rag Doll form. For many it is the stuff of childhood nightmares, a lifeless body now animate, suspended between human and inhuman states, inducing fear, and characterising horror. The terror at the centre of these films lies with the doll itself, the boundaries between reality and imagination blur as this human double is transplanted from real doll to fictional horror, intrinsically linking paranormal experience, supernatural theory, and crafted terror. These films have successfully enabled this particular disturbing doll to transgress time, moving from past curiosity to present spectacle, and in the

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<sup>1298</sup> Eljaiek-Rodríguez, *Baroque Aesthetics in Contemporary American Horror*, 112.

<sup>1299</sup> Wetmore, *The Conjuring*, 68.

process broadening the macabre appeal established from behind its glass case at The Occult Museum. With *The Conjuring* Wan succeeded, as Pagnoni Berns and Edwards note, in making Annabelle “a name to fear,”<sup>1300</sup> and this fear has been cemented with later cinematic interpretations of the demon doll’s tale. Recognition ought also to be given to Wan for introducing the Warrens to a more international wide-ranging audience. These films, together with the real stories upon which they are based, feed into a broader ongoing cultural narrative that suggests that a doll, particularly one believed to be haunted, is something to be feared.

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<sup>1300</sup> Pagnoni Berns and Edwards, “Introduction,” 8.

## Conclusion

“We’re afraid of the life we’re meager enough to term inanimate.”<sup>1301</sup>

### **Dennis Silk**

When considering the topic of dolls and horror, various avenues are open to possible exploration and interpretation. One such subject is the rising popularity of Gothic toys, including dolls, marketed at both children and adults, a trend reflective of the broader seepage of the Gothic into popular culture. As Victoria Carrington notes, the market for these figures is thriving with “Art Impressions’ Skelanimals, Applehead Factory’s Teddy Scares, Cosmic Debris’ clip-on plush Skele-Kitty and Miles Patchwork Kitty, the Emily the Strange series of merchandise, Dark Horse’s Tragic Toys, Underground Toys’ Little Apple Dolls, the Ged Backland Studio’s Scarlett and Crimson dolls, the Living Dead Doll series,”<sup>1302</sup> and Monster High dolls, amongst others, now readily available to purchase. These dolls largely echo the central themes of the Gothic – death, madness, monstrosity, ghoulishness – yet their horror is somewhat balanced by their superficial cuteness and as such they are emblematic of what Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska defines as ‘Monstrous/Cute’.<sup>1303</sup> As Catherine Spooner observes, these dolls “highlight the freakish nature of the cute body, its anatomical abnormalcy and its simultaneous prettiness and ugliness.”<sup>1304</sup> Moreover these dolls typify the Gothic’s established and enduring connection to both popular culture and mass consumption.

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<sup>1301</sup> Dennis Silk, *William the Wonder-Kid: Plays, Puppet Plays and Theater Writing* (Riverdale-on-Hudson: Sheep Meadow Press, 1997), 239.

<sup>1302</sup> Victoria Carrington, “The Contemporary Gothic: Literacy and Childhood in Unsettled Times,” *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 12:3 (December 2011): 6.

<sup>1303</sup> For Brzozowska-Brywczyńska’s definition of this term see chapter one.

<sup>1304</sup> Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 103.

A second potential avenue of further exploration is the depiction of dolls within horror video games. Commenting on the significance of the genre to the medium, Dawn Stobbart notes that “horror has been part of videogames almost since their inception.”<sup>1305</sup> The recent surge in academic criticism on the topic is perhaps unsurprising given that video games, as Mark Hills asserts, go “beyond the critical hegemony of ‘horror = films and novels’.”<sup>1306</sup> Killer dolls are not now confined to the silver or small screen, or found solely within the pages of a paperback, in recent years they have migrated with an array of horror videogames utilising the trope to great effect. In Tecmo’s *Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly* (2003) the player, equipped with a ghost-hunting camera obscura, investigates haunted houses before encountering the life-sized doll doppelgänger of a deceased child. In Monolith Production’s *Condemned 2: Bloodshot* (2008) the danger is not one doll, but rather a factory full of condemned figures, commanded by a sawblade wielding boss known as ‘Doll Woman.’ SKH Apps’ *Emily Wants to Play* (2015) is a somewhat unique entry into the sub-genre as each of the three ‘living’ dolls that accompany the titular Emily are distinct, each requiring the player to complete different, potentially deadly, games to secure their freedom. Amongst the mass of disturbing animatronics that populate the world of Scott Cawthon’s *Five Nights at Freddy’s: Sister Location* (2016) the secondary antagonist ‘Circus Baby’, is notable, both in her original rag-doll-esque form, and subsequent mutilated ‘Scrap Baby’ iteration. Vaka Game Magazine’s *Tsugunobi: Whispering Toy House* (2020) explores the seepage of the supernatural into the everyday as the young protagonist uncovers a house that is home to a vast collection of antique dolls, as the supernatural occurrences escalate, she discovers her place amongst the collection. In KIRA LLC’s *The Doll House* (2020) the player must free the trapped spirits of the mansion from their doll confines without condemning humanity. Set in an alternate version of 1920s America, the namesake of Casper Croes’ *Alisa* (2021) awakens to find herself trapped, surrounded by mechanized dolls, and eerily resembling one herself. Soul Soup’s *Ceramic Soul* (2022) centres upon

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<sup>1305</sup> Dawn Stobbart, *Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019), 12.

<sup>1306</sup> Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London: Continuum, 2005), 6.

a porcelain doll, Yu, crafted by a controlling mother to be a perfect replica of her estranged daughter, the player is able to detach Yu's body parts in order to solve the puzzles that will lead to her eventual freedom. Body horror is a common component within video games of the genre, and Karmic Punishment's *Don't Toy With Me* (2022) develops this trend, showcasing it in synthetic toys rather than organic lifeforms.

Another area of potential study is the depiction of 'living' dolls within literature and visual media aimed at children. The idea of a doll, or toy, coming to life has been a recurrent theme in children's literature since its inception, and in many of these narratives this transformation is inherently Gothic. The infamous puppet's quest to become a 'real' boy in Carlo Collodi's episodic classic *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) is beset by instances of violence, entrapment, and torture, which Pinocchio ultimately must overcome if he is to succeed and traverse the in/human binary. L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) stresses the confinement and fragility inherent to a china doll's form, when Dorothy, whilst in the "country of the china people"<sup>1307</sup> enquires whether one of its porcelain inhabitants would like to return with her and discovers the peculiar fate of such dolls: "you see, here in our country we live contentedly, and can talk and move around as we please. But whenever any of us are taken away our joints at once stiffen, and we can only stand and look pretty."<sup>1308</sup> Dare Wright's unique children's classic *The Lonely Doll* (1957) is haunting in its portrayal of the child-doll relationship. Wright authored and photographed the narrative utilising her own 1920s felt Lenci doll.<sup>1309</sup> She altered the aesthetic of the doll, changing elements to mirror her own, and in doing so, arguably created a more authentic human double. The narrative is a peculiar mix of absurd and grotesque, filled with scenes of misery, isolation, and punishment. In Sylvia Cassedy's *Behind the Attic Wall* (1983) the adolescent protagonist, Maggie, after hearing

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<sup>1307</sup> L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009), 200.

<sup>1308</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>1309</sup> *The Lonely Doll* became a bestseller in America and was followed by nine sequels, the last of which *Edith and the Duckling*, was published in 1981. In the decades since its publication the series has become something of a cult classic.

ghostly voices, “faint scrapings, tiny whispers, stray words,”<sup>1310</sup> discovers a hidden room where “everything had the air of being suddenly abandoned. Somebody, just moments before, had been playing here.”<sup>1311</sup> The space is populated by sizeable china dolls which, it transpires, are somewhat alive, animated by the lingering spirits of the recently deceased. In Helen Morgan’s *The Witch Doll* (1991) dolls are able to transfer from an inhuman to human state through the acquisition of real human hair wigs, the eerie consequence of such action being, that their human counterparts concomitantly regress to a doll-like form.

Uncanny dolls likewise populate the world of children’s animation. Sally, a humanoid ragdoll, is but one character amongst a whole host of demonic toys that Henry Selick’s Gothic stop-motion animated film *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) showcases. Crafted by the maniacal Dr Finkelstein, Sally is a patchwork of pieces, stitched together and stuffed with dry leaves, who is able to reattach her lost limbs, her lifeless body (re)animated through this. The violence inherent in the act of child’s play is amplified in John Lasseter’s modern-day classic *Toy Story* (1995) through the army of mutant toys that sadistic neighbour Sid creates. In his Frankensteinian childhood bedroom-come-laboratory, Sid fashions new life from artificial bodies, decapitating his sister’s precious doll and substituting its head with that of a plastic pterodactyl. Woody and Buzz’s escape from this hellish workshop is stalled by the advance of a procession of Sid’s monstrous creations, at the head of which stands a half-doll/half-crab hybrid. In a world of sentient figures that talk and walk, the true horror of these creations, however, lies not in their ghastly appearance, but in their muteness, a trait that generates fear in their peers and irrevocably marks them out as ‘other.’ As Chiara Cappelletto observes, this deconstruction of a toy’s body is repeated later in the franchise by Lee Unkrich, in *Toy Story 3* (2010): the toys, when “handled by the children, become mere bodies at risk of being torn to pieces [...] [they] seem incapable of

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<sup>1310</sup> Sylvia Cassedy, *Behind the Attic Wall* (New York: Avon Books, 1985), 310.

<sup>1311</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

having a long-term future other than being recycled, stored, or destroyed.”<sup>1312</sup> From the title sequence of Henry Selick’s sinister stop-motion animation *Coraline* (2009) the importance of dolls is apparent as unattached metal claws deconstruct and remake a doll, creating Coraline’s new altered persona, her fabric double. The punch and cut deconstruction here is distressing, the inversion horrifying, as Coraline’s human replica is transferred, altered, and modified into an ‘other’, a perfect fit for this ‘other’ world inhabited by an ‘other’ mother - a grotesque imitation of maternity with black button eyes.

More often than not dolls appear in children’s narratives, particularly those that border the Gothic, to deliver a moral lesson, or provide a warning. These fictional dolls more broadly speaking, “express the limits of human arrogance and hubris, the desire for family or companionship [...] a yearning for immortality and longevity, an obsession over the death of a loved one, the abuse of power, and madness, slavery and revenge”<sup>1313</sup> alongside an enduring fascination with both reality and identity, and their inherent limits. In the realm of dolls and horror, their appearance in video games, children’s media, and as a marketable collector’s toy, are all pertinent and intriguing areas of potential future study. Regrettably, it has not been possible to analyse these topics fully within the confines of this thesis, rather it has been necessary to be selective.

This thesis, as the first full length study on the topic of dolls and horror, intended to provide a comprehensive examination of the ‘living’ doll figure in contemporary horror narratives. The aim of this examination was threefold, first, to go some way in addressing critical neglect of the ‘living’ doll subgenre, second, to establish the form that these figures take within it, and third,

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<sup>1312</sup> Chiara Cappelletto, “The Puppet’s Paradox: An Organic Prosthesis,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59/60 (Spring-Autumn 2011): 326.

<sup>1313</sup> Gary Westfahl, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works and Wonders* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 209.



to determine their function. This expansive, interdisciplinary project, that weaves visual and literary media with folklore and established legend, provides an alternate way of looking at the figure of the doll that differs from previous formalist or genre specific approaches. To date, as explored in the introduction, scholars have largely approached this topic through analysis of one or two specific texts. This study, instead, draws on a wide range of sources from literature, film, television, and the visual arts to provide a broader picture of the 'living' doll figure within contemporary horror. Furthermore, as an interdisciplinary project it contributes, not only to the discipline of Dolls Studies, but also makes a valuable contribution to ongoing academic discourse on objects in the Gothic, as typified by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville's edited collection, *The Gothic and the Everyday: Living Gothic* (2014), and more recently by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's monograph *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety* (2023).

The first chapter of this thesis centred upon that most iconic of cinematic 'living' dolls Chucky. It explored how both Tom Holland's original and Lars Klevberg's remake, *Child's Play*, shrewdly undermine the societal credence of consumerism through the figure of the consumed doll, first in a 1980s and then in a present-day context. It also highlighted the dualism of Chucky which has had a fundamental and lasting impact on the multitude of contemporary 'living' doll horror narratives which have followed. Chapter two examined how Angela Carter and Ramsey Campbell confront societal fetishization of the female form within their literature. Within their carefully constructed erotic doll narratives, both Carter and Campbell position the sexualised doll, or doll-like female, as much more than a mere submissive object, for their fetishized dolls are granted agency and with it, the ability to evoke both fear and desire in their living counterparts. Chapter three explored cinematic, literary, and televisual depictions of the memorialised doll against that most Gothic of backdrops, death. It examined how, in Campbell's *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*, Charlie Brooker's 'Be Right Back', and William Brent Bell's *The Boy*, these memorial objects, while having an inescapable link to the past, recurrently have an unsettling, sometimes

horrific, impact on the present. Mirroring the first chapter of this thesis, the final chapter centred upon another, singular, malevolent entity, Annabelle. It examined how through *The Conjuring* universe James Wan succeeded in making this haunted doll “a name to fear.”<sup>1314</sup> This chapter assessed how these films, together with the real stories upon which they are based, feed into a broader ongoing cultural narrative that suggests that a doll, particularly one believed to be haunted, is something to be feared. The decision to examine familiar depictions of eerie ‘living’ dolls, alongside more obscure examples was a conscious one that intended to ensure a comprehensive study of the topic, within which tropes, patterns, and variations could be easily highlighted and subsequently examined. The contemporary focus of the project was likewise intentional, and facilitated, particularly in the chapters that focused upon fetishization and memorialisation, examination of the ‘living’ doll’s relevance to ongoing contemporary debates concerning bodily autonomy and the unintended human consequences of technological innovation.

Due to their sheer number, it is perhaps inevitable that these eerie ‘living’ doll horror narratives appear to have influenced the public imaginary. Indeed, it is a self-perpetuating cycle, the idea of a sentient doll provoking fear did not start with the horror genre, but these narratives, have, undoubtedly, greatly influenced it. Annabelle, Chucky, and other lesser known icons of the subgenre, typify our enduring cultural fascination with animism and anthropomorphism, with what Victoria Nelson terms “the spiritualizing of matter and the demiurgic infusion of soul into human simulacra.”<sup>1315</sup> For the most part these monstrous dolls are willingly, indeed sometimes eagerly, brought into the sanctity of the home, thus ‘evil’ is permitted to infiltrate through an object, that while inherently uncanny, also appears innocuous.

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<sup>1314</sup> Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Matthew Edwards, “Introduction: James Wan, Auteur”, in *The Cinema of James Wan: Critical Essays*, eds. Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Matthew Edwards (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2022), 8.

<sup>1315</sup> Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 20.

As this thesis has demonstrated these uncanny entities are particularly suited to a genre that revels in the unknown, embraces monsters in all their varied manifestations, and highlights particularly human fears. As Anne Billson notes, dolls have, over the decades “made a consistently chilling contribution to the horror genre,”<sup>1316</sup> a contribution that only seems likely to persist. The Gothic by its very nature “is a world in which the vibrant materiality of things is received as ominous,” one that repeatedly teaches us, as Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock notes, “that it is never, ever good when objects stop working for us, assert themselves, and transform from ‘dead stuff’ to ‘live presence’.”<sup>1317</sup> As this thesis has demonstrated the monstrous doll has been a notable figure in horror for decades, and is an entity that continues to articulately reflect contemporary anxieties, whether that relates to society’s monstrous consumerism, its fetishization of women, its all-encompassing obsession with death, or to the fear that those, once dead, may return. The terror at the very heart of these objects lies in their innate immobility and in their uncanny resemblance to something that they are inherently not, human. It lies in the idea, particularly within a horror context, that these inhuman entities possess the potential to gain sentience, or at least a semblance of it. When the seemingly inanimate become alive, either through possession, haunting, technological developments, or some other inexplicable force, their human counterparts are instinctively reminded of their own, impending mortality, of their predetermined fate as humans to become, in death, inanimate, while these uncanny entities seemingly live on.

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<sup>1316</sup> Anne Billson, “From Hugo to Chucky and Annabelle – Who is the Scariest Doll of Them All?,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/apr/20/from-hugo-to-chucky-and-annabelle-who-is-the-scariest-doll-of-them-all>.

<sup>1317</sup> Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023), 10.

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