Digital Natives, Digital Monsters: The Technological Child Villain in Hollywood

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Horror Films

In 1982, Neil Postman released his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, in which he expressed great fear of the "disembodied" and "uncontrollable" information that he saw attacking children through television (69, 71). The same year, Tobe Hooper and Steven Spielberg released the film *Poltergeist*, embodying Postman's worst nightmares. *Poltergeist* is, in many ways, a horror film in which television is the main villain. Despite the revelation that the haunted house in which the Freeling family lives was built on a graveyard, the haunting force comes initially not from the graves, but through the TV.[1] The horror of the modern ghost story, we quickly learn, comes not from the supernatural, but from the unnatural, the technological. Once the Freelings have escaped the haunted house and moved into a motel, they still cannot feel safe until Mr. Freeling has moved the room's television set outside onto the balcony. While this moment is clearly intended as one of comic relief, the camera nevertheless lingers ominously on the television before panning away slowly while credits begin to roll, placing the television set in the position of the villain who will surely rise again. While later films have drawn on this trope, *Poltergeist* was the first film to so clearly place new media, and its child accomplice (willing or not), in this villainous role.[2]

Tellingly, the only person who can communicate with the haunting force in the Freelings' house is their youngest daughter, Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke). "The TV people," as Carol Anne calls them, speak to her in the perceived silence between programs or stations, through what the rest of the family sees and hears only as static on the television. When Carol Anne is eventually pulled into the TV people's alternate dimension, the clairvoyant hired to retrieve her explains the demonic presence's attraction to the little girl: "it tells her things only a child could understand. . . . To her, it simply *is* another child. To us, it is the Beast."[3] The "TV people" are drawn to Carol Anne not because she has innocence that they can corrupt, or because children are more in tune with their imaginations, or anything else that the Romantic ideal of childhood might lead viewers to expect. They are connected to the child because they are *like* the child—because they

speak the same language. Carol Ann not only understands the "TV people," she identifies them as like herself, recognizes "the Beast" as inherently child-like. *Poltergeist* not only literalizes the fears expressed by the 1954 Senate Subcommittee on juvenile delinquency of monstrous "ideas that *spring into the living room* for the entertainment of the youth of America, which have to do with crime and with horror, sadism, and sex" (Spigel 55, emphasis added), but confirms the child's inherent receptiveness to these ideas, and, more disturbingly, the child's uncomfortable closeness with the technology from which they "spring." This article traces the links between children, technology, and horror by focusing on films in which the television, specifically the child's uncontrolled viewing, is the site of horror, starting with *Poltergeist* and moving on to *Sinister* (2012), and *The Ring* (2002), which further explore the child's intimate relationship with—and similarity to—villainous technology in the age of viral media. In all of these films, children's apparent innate understanding of and familiarity with new technologies of knowledge distribution highlights adults' lack of understanding of both. Children and technology, both framed as uncanny and dangerous "others," are the future, but a future that is terrifying for adults, one that realizes age-old fears of being replaced by something newer, stronger, and smarter.

In the past few decades, transhumanist, posthumanist, and queer theorists have sometimes imagined technologically-altered humans as part of a hopeful future. Transhumanism, in particular, frames technological advances as part of an exciting new evolution of humanity. Defined by philosopher Max More in 1990 as "a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values" (3), transhumanism posits technological advances as part of the future of the human race.[4] In popular films and television, however, attempts to augment human abilities and bodies with technology typically result in horror, rather than hope: in the Netflix series *Black Mirror*, for example, the technologies of life extension that so excite More almost always end up as tools of torture and suffering. The perceived horror of technological "evolution" links naturally with the horror inherent in the child—technology and children may be able to evolve, together, to become transhuman, but that not-quite-humanness seems uncanny and horrific to many adults.

Recent years have seen a boom in scholarship on childhood and horror, and especially on children in horror films—perhaps most influentially, Dominic Lennard's *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors* (2014), and the anthology *Monstrous*

Children and Childish Monsters (2015), edited by Markus P. J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland. Yet texts that offer more than a cursory study of *why* evil children suddenly became so popular in film are difficult to find. Authors tend to note the trope of the child as other (often citing Robin Wood's 1979 "An Introduction to the American Horror Film"), and sometimes refer to panics surrounding children and young people's consumption of media, but they fail to link the two through the figure of the horrifying, posthuman child which seems to me to be so prevalent in modern horror film. Other authors, such as Lennard and Karen J. Renner, offer compelling accounts of the connection of media with youthful villainy, but tend to conflate childhood and adolescence, ignoring the ways in which the two are actually often framed as opposites in contemporary society.[5] The linking of children and media technologies in recent horror films produces especially threatening child monsters, I argue, not just because of the "categorical violation" of the "child who kills" that made films such as *The Bad Seed* (1956) so horrifying (Lennard 31), but because they play on real fears of power reversals between adults and children brought about by younger generations' increasing comfort with new media technologies. As Lennard points out, many horror films (even those that present children as threats) ultimately remind us of a balance of power that decidedly favors adults. "Even in those films where the child is somehow (usually supernaturally rather than socially) empowered, such as in *The Shining* (1980) or *Firestarter* (1984)," Lennard says, "the assumption of fragility and need for (adult) protection is heavily underscored" (8). Children's perceived connection with technology is frightening because it implies a non-supernatural way in which children could gain actual, social power. The films discussed in this article take this notion a step further, imagining children's physical power disadvantage as also easily overcome by technological advantages. Even child-sociopath Rhoda, at the end of *The Bad Seed*, can be picked up and spanked by her mother—children who live within videotapes or film escape the ever-present threat of being physically overpowered by a larger adult. These modern child villains aren't dependent on their parents for knowledge, for power, for money—and they also can't be spanked.

In her book *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*, Kristen Thompson persuasively argues that the "culture wars" of the late twentieth–early twenty-first century created a type of horror in which the focus is on the family. In these films, the heterosexual family unit, and its ever-present ability to be destroyed (or, worse, exposed as a fiction), is the primary site of horror (13-14).[6] In *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the*

American Movie Business, Kevin Heffernan points to what he refers to as the "increasing… obsess[ion]" with the villainous child in horror films of the 1950s-60s, suggesting that this child's rise to prominence was directly connected to parents' fear that they could no longer control either their children or their children's culture. Quoting William Paul, Heffernan posits that attempts at censorship of children's entertainment were based "not so much [on] protecting the children from what they might see as [on] protecting the parents from what their children might become" (185).[7] The fear is not that children will become adults too soon, but that they will become something else entirely. "What does it mean that our children have become more informed than ever before? That they know what their elders know?" Postman asks. "It means that they have become adults, or, at least, *adult-like*" (97, emphasis added). If, as Postman suggests, children are by their very definition "a group of people who do *not* know certain things that adults know" (85, emphasis in original), then why is the knowing child only "adult-like," rather than simply "adult?" Postman's creature who is neither adult nor child evokes Freud's discussion of the uncanny automaton—*adult-like*, but somehow not adult. Is the child only adult-*like* because of her physical stature, or is there something genuinely, perhaps frighteningly different about her, that cannot be reconciled with the knowledge of hyphen-free adults?

Prominent education theorist Marc Prensky answers this question with a resounding "yes" in his 2001 essay "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." For the real fear of the child is not that she is becoming "un-childlike," that she is learning too fast what adults know. Rather, the fear that Prensky validates, despite his ostensibly celebratory tone, is not that children know what adults know, but that they know much more. Prensky suggests that the rise of television and the internet in the late twentieth century was " 'a singularity' – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back" (1).[8] According to Prensky, the generation of young people who grew up with television and the Internet, whom he terms "Digital Natives," "*think and process information fundamentally differently* from their predecessors. . . . it is very likely that *our students' brains have physically changed* – and are different from ours" (1, emphasis in original). Young people, Prensky suggests, in language straight from a sci-fi horror film, have not only grown up with different information and media, but literally have different brains than their parents, speak "*an entirely new language*" (2, emphasis in original). In Prensky's use, the term "native," frames children as alien inhabitants of a strange and exotic new world in which older "immigrants" tread with fear (the racialized implications of

the term are not, I think, coincidental, something that I discuss in more detail later in this article). From the "Eastern" Dracula to the "Indian burial grounds" that so thankfully *aren't* under the Freeling's home in *Poltergeist*, the exotic has always been a key component of horror, and children are more exotic than ever. The idea that, as Prensky suggests, children's brains are literally, perhaps physically, different from those of their parents, plays to the worst fears of parenting—will our children grow up to be horribly different than us? Are we raising some sort of technological changelings? If children speak another language, have different brain waves, and have an inherent sympathy with technology, isn't it almost to be expected that they can hear things in the television static that we can't?

Despite some turn-of-the-century forays into writing about ghostly or haunted childhoods (Henry James's 1898 *The Turn of the Screw* being the most prominent example), the notion of the "evil" or possessed child did not become popular until the mid-twentieth-century.[9] The timing of this child's appearance, I argue, is no coincidence, but rather directly related to the dramatically changing role of technology in American homes during this time period, and the special relationship that children were seen as having with this technology. Television, and later the internet, allowed children access to information that was not taught to them by their parents or learned through reading (which itself must be taught). For Postman, the gradual and properly ordered dissemination of information is what differentiates adults from children (a cultural construction that he believes is valuable). Our dominant conception of childhood is one that relies on innocence, which is based largely on ignorance. Almost immediately, though, new home media technologies not only challenged the norms of what children learned, and in what order, but became something that they knew more about than their parents, belying the fact that children are inherently those who know less. As communication technologies (chief among them television) that easily bypassed parents' approval became more a part of children's daily lives, popular views of childhood also shifted from the Romantic notion of the child as at one with nature to Prensky's modern notion of children as "digital natives," a new, and potentially threatening, breed of humans whose brains work quite differently than those of their parents. While nineteenth-century children (particularly boys) were thought of as "bad" perhaps just as often as they were thought of as perfectly innocent, this badness was seen as natural, rather than otherworldly. Boys were feral and wild, and knew less, not more, than adults. If their "wildness" could imply violence, it also implied a certain simplicity and innocence. In the mid-

twentieth century, as children presumably spent less time outdoors, and more time in front of the television, this linking of children and nature begin to change – and, with it, the role of children in horror.

We see this change from children as one with nature to one with technology in *Poltergeist*, in which five-year-old Carol Anne is terrified by a storm, but perfectly comfortable with the mysterious "people" who speak to her though the television static. The Freeling children's fear of storms is a repeated motif in the film, and its significance goes beyond typical, child-like fear to highlight the generational divide between what scares parents and children. The children are decidedly more frightened by "nature" than they are by any of the events that are intended to evoke horror in the film's more mature viewers. Carol Anne's eight-year-old brother, Robbie (whose bedroom is decorated entirely in *Star Wars* memorabilia, suggesting an affinity for sci-fi, film, and futuristic technology), is terrified not only of the storm, but of a tree outside his window, which he fears because "it knows I live here." Robbie is not comforted by his father's suggestion that the tree is there to protect them and is "a wise old tree." Rather than wisdom, these children of technology see in nature only horror—and, in turn, as they become further divorced from nature, they become vehicles of horror to the adults in their lives. Robbie's fear of the tree underscores an aspect of what makes children of technology so frightening to their parents. Mr. Freeling's focus on the tree's age as a positive attribute—its wiseness, and, by implication, friendliness, is linked to its being old—stands in direct contrast to Robbie's thoughts on the tree, which seem to include its age as one of the frightening qualities that make the tree incomprehensible and, therefore threatening. If children are products of a culture that equates knowledge with newness, rather than age, then the fear becomes not simply that they know more, but that their value system is directly threatening to their parents.

In more recent horror films, this threat in stated more explicitly. Prensky's notion of the digital native is literalized and brought to its logical conclusion in early twenty-first-century horror films *The Ring* (2002) and *Sinister* (2012), which show us murderous children who are one with technology. In both films, killer children dwell in and travel via video tapes. While earlier horror films like *Poltergeist* position the television as the "real" villain, transporting the innocent child to an evil realm, *Sinister* and *The Ring* show an alliance between children and technology that places the child squarely on the side of the (evil) technological. In *The Ring*, murderous child Samara (Daveigh Chase) literally emerges from videos tapes, while in *Sinister*, the notion that children are

influenced to do evil by what they see on the screen to is taken to the extreme in the demon Bughuul (Nicholas King), who seduces children through videos and convinces them to murder their families. A literalized TV bogeyman, Bughuul lives in and travels through images. It's interesting to note that in neither *The Ring* nor *Sinister* do the monsters travel over the internet—Bughuul's medium of choice is Super 8 film, and Samara's is VHS videotapes. Despite being made in the viral age, then, both of these films rely heavily on viral spread through mediums that are slightly out of date, suggesting both that there is still something particularly uncanny about the medium of filmed images, the first technology that we widely accepted into our homes, and that the internet might actually be *too* far beyond comprehension to be properly frightening to older viewers.[10] Even *Come Play* (2020), which focuses on a child's relationship with a monster who uses an iPad as a "window" to our world, doesn't touch on the device's ability to connect to the internet. Instead, *Come Play* focuses on the device's features that link it to traditional film: its ability to visually depict a story (in this case, to act as an eReader), and its camera, which is the only way to see the monster in the real world.[11]

The films in which Bughuul resides are particularly gruesome, each one showing a family being brutally murdered by an unseen agent. We view these films alongside *Sinister*'s main character, true-crime novelist and father Ellison Oswalt (Ethan Hawke), whose conflicting reactions of revulsion and intrigue mirror the audience's. What we are never shown, however, is the Oswalts' two children's reactions to the films. We know that seven-year-old Ashley (Clare Foley), the eventual murderer, sees the films at some point—both because she murders her family, and because we see her in bed pretending to be asleep with a ghostly girl hiding beside her after Oswalt has found the film running in the middle of the night, implying that the two girls have just been watching the film. Both she and her brother, however, have knowledge of the murders that seems unlikely to have come from schoolmates (as their mother assumes) or the internet (as their father assumes). This knowledge is depicted as visual—the family's son, Trevor (Michael Hall D'Addario), gets in trouble at school for drawing a picture of their home's previous residents being hanged, and Ashley draws both Bughuul and the young girl who committed the most recent murders on her bedroom wall. It is reasonable to assume, then, that both children have seen the films, but the fact that we don't have access to their viewing practices both further mystifies Bughuul's appeal, and muddies the children's agency in the

murders—if we don't see them enjoying the films, we can't be quite sure if they are possessed, coerced, or just inherently eager to kill their family.

In *Sinister 2* (2015), we *do* get access to the scene (multiple scenes, in fact) in which a new family of children view Bughuul's snuff films. In this sequel, Bughuul's army of ghostly children (ghostly figures, but not really ghosts—they appear to literally live in Bughuul's film) attempt to initiate twin brothers Dylan (Robert Sloan) and Zach (Dartanian Sloan) into their ranks. Dylan, to whom they show the films first, isn't interested, but Zach very much is. Zach is depicted as a sort of "bad seed" in a way that Ashley never is in the first film, and part of his badness stems from rage towards his abusive father (conveniently, only the father and Zach die in the sequel's attempted murder spree). The implication that Ashley watched the films, and that their violence appealed to her, is more troubling, because we aren't given either any other scenes of her behaving as if she's "evil"/troubled, or anything else that seems like a satisfying reason for her obvious enjoyment of violence.[12]

As in *Poltergeist*, *Sinister*'s snuff films appeal (in both senses of the word) to children because the children and the films are somehow alike—there is something particularly childish in Ashley that is triggered by watching snuff films, and it isn't innocence. Or, perhaps it is—as James Kincaid suggests, the strange lack of motive in onscreen child-killers derives from the same "emptying" of the child figure that is crucial to conceptions of innocence ("Sweet Demons – And Us" 8).[13] According to Kincaid, "[b]y insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism" (*Child-Loving* 5).[14] While Kincaid is most interested in the erotics part (which, perhaps, isn't unrelated), innocence also insists on the lack of knowledge of violence and evil—which, inevitably, means that violence and evil are implicitly present in our imaginings of "innocent" children. Defining something in terms only of lack is still defining it in terms of *what* it lacks—it is impossible to imagine innocence without imagining its eventual corruption.

In both *Sinister* films, evil and erotics converge as apparently "innocent" children are seduced, not possessed, by the demon in the technology. Most of the children, in fact, don't actually require much seducing at all. The children refer to Bughuul as "Mr. Boogie," a play on the bogeyman, and, while they sometimes seem frightened by him, they often don't. According to screenwriter Robert Cargill, Bughuul was envisioned as scary, yet appealing to children. Originally, he says, the demon was supposed to look like a sort of "Willy Wonka meets Marilyn Manson." The reference to Willy Wonka links Cargill's bogeyman explicitly to

accepted, appealing images of childhood (even if the style is one that the filmmakers eventually moved away from, deeming it "too silly").[15] It also makes explicit the darkness already inherent in these images: while he admittedly doesn't murder adults, Willy Wonka might have more in common with Bughuul than we're comfortable admitting. The final shot of the film that shows the previous occupants of the Oswalts' house being hanged (which is initially expunged), shows the murderous daughter swinging playfully from her dead parent's feet, echoing the drawing that Ashley made of the girl sitting on a tire swing in the same tree. The murders are not an aberration from childhood innocence, but inherently childish, a form of play.

Sinister makes these links between "conventional" childhood and horror obvious, framing the children repeatedly as the film's monsters. In most of the instances when the film telegraphs that something scary is about to appear, what does appear is a child—in one tense scene, Oswalt hears a noise, slowly and cautiously opens a door, and finds his daughter, apparently looking for the bathroom. His son, who sleepwalks and suffers from night terrors, pops out of an empty moving box one night, and out of the bushes in the backyard another. All of these shots are built to as if they're going to show us a monster—and all of them do. Early in the film, after watching one of Bughuul's snuff films for the first time, we are shown Oswalt making two notes: "WHO MADE THE FILM?" and "WHERE'S STEPHANIE?". The film is edited in such a way that it's clear that the questions answer each other—Stephanie is making the film. Within the first ten minutes of Sinister, the audience is given a crucial clue to the murderer's identity that Oswalt deliberately ignores for the next two hours. Shortly after this, he finds childish drawings of all of the murder victims shown in the tapes, clearly labelled by the children who were apparently abducted after each murder (the parents are labelled "mommy" and "daddy," rather than with their names). This, too, he ignores. Similarly, we see the ghostly children lurking around Oswalt's house several times before he notices them. The Oswalts' conventional guardianship of their children becomes ironic, their focus on protecting them from the horrific films and images in their father's office ridiculous, as it becomes clear to the audience that the children are actually the root of the horror.

A large part of Sinister's appeal seems to lie in the obviousness of its final "twist." That one of the children will kill their family is almost immediately obvious to most viewers, but the children's parents don't realize it until it's too late, creating a pleasurable situation in which we root for the seemingly innocent children's parents to kill them, while knowing, all along, that we're going to be

proven right in our belief that they were dangerous, and therefore vindicated in our desire for their death. In other words, the film allows us to desire the death of children who *we* know are corrupted, while their parents still believe firmly in their innocence. The film offers a panicky literalization of the terror of the younger generation's close relationship with technology, as children's danger to the older generation is brutally dramatized. *Sinister* moves beyond Postman's romantic narrative, which insists that television makes children dangerous because they are so easily influenced by the images they see and the information that they hear. Instead, it exposes the belief that is often hiding beyond discourses of protection: children are dangerous not because their "innocence" means that they are easily corrupted, but because they are eager to be corrupted, not because they are impressionable, but because images and acts of violence appeal to them.

Cargill frames *Sinister* within the same Romantic narrative that Mary Shelley, over a century earlier, framed her famous tale of monstrous offspring, claiming that the idea for the film came from a nightmare. In Cargill's case, this nightmare was apparently inspired by *The Ring*.[16] While both films deal with literal digital natives, children who apparently dwell within and emerge from visual technologies, the link between the monstrous child and the monstrous technology is made even more explicit in *The Ring*. In the Japanese original, *Ringu*, Sadako's (Samara in the US film) mother is a powerful "seer," whose abilities Sadako (Rie Ino'o) has inherited, and her father is vaguely implied to be a mythical creature connected somehow to the sea. For Lennard, Sadako's "supernatural lineage . . . goes at least some way toward nullifying the moralistic overtones of her vengeance. In *The Ring*, however," according to Lennard, "Samara has no predetermined supernatural origin to speak of— her freakishness is rephrased as a product of social neglect" (87).[17] While Samara's origin may not be supernatural in the traditional sense, it is in a more literal sense—her origin is not only unnatural, but *more than* natural, symbolic of humanity's triumph over nature. While her exact origins are unclear, *The Ring* heavily codes Samara as the product of biological reproductive technologies that literalize the notion of the modern child as a techno/human hybrid. Lennard's analysis of Samara's "freakishness" as "a product of social neglect" is contested by this reading of her origin. Samara's parents, after all, neglect (and eventually murder) her only after she has driven her mother mad with violent visions, killed her parents' beloved horses, and failed to respond to multiple psychiatric treatments. Samara's evil is depicted as being as much a product of her "freakish" means of conception as

Sadako's is. Drawing on contemporary panics around technologies such as IVF and surrogacy that may allow some privileged women (and men) to control how, when, and if they become parents, *The Ring* literalizes fears of the child who is more technological than human.[18]

A literal child of technology, Samara's method of reproduction, through videotape, recalls and intensifies her technological method of conception. The television set and videotape become both surrogate bodies and surrogate wombs for Samara. In the novel upon which the Japanese film was based, Sadako's powers are linked explicitly to a pathologized gender identity and a desire to reproduce—we learn that she is intersex, and that because of this she is unable to have children (in both the Japanese film and the novel, Sadako seems to be older than the pre-teen Samara). While this detail is left out of the films, the theme of videocopying as a form of reproduction remains. In *The Ring*, copying the film is less of a means for Samara to tell her story (it doesn't, after all, actually tell her story in anything but cryptic images), than it is a means to reproduce not just her image, but her powers and personality. Samara's videotapes are shown to engender, or at least house, living things—a fly that appears on the screen can be pulled out/off of it, foreshadowing Samara's later emergence from the screen, but also exposing the tape's status as incubator of flesh and blood, living (or undead) creatures. For Caetlin Benson-Allot, the fact that "water precedes the arrival of the film's inhuman horror, Samara, in a way that cannot help but remind the viewer of the American colloquialism 'her water broke.' *The Ring* is thus awash in amniotic fluid, the abject byproduct of a pregnant videotape" (123).[19] An artificial womb that houses both flies and ghostly, murderous girls, the videotape is the ultimate literalization of the terrors of biological reproductive technology, and calls to mind the concept of the archaic mother, a woman who can procreate by herself, without the need of a male partner.[20] The fact that Samara is an apparently pre-pubescent child complicates this further—her ability to reproduce (and, perhaps more crucially, reproduce *herself*) through videotapes challenges not just gender norms, but the boundary between child and adult.

This crossing of boundaries, between "life and not-life," child and adult, machine and living being, and proper and excessive female desire, is markedly present in *The Ring*, and calls to mind Kristeva's definition of the abject as that that "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4).[21] Barbara Creed expands upon Kristeva's definition, saying that "abject things are those which highlight the 'fragility of the law' and which exist on the other side of the border that separates out the living subject from that

which threatens its extinction" (39).[22] Samara literalizes these fears, as her relationship with the technological seems closer than her relationship with humanity—she lives with only a television for company, physically emerges from a television set, and is able to record on a video tape using just her mind in the same way that she is able to project images into human minds, suggesting an uncomfortable similarity between the mediums of human brain matter and videotape. The psychically-encoded video tapes are spoken of in the language of human monstrosity. When Rachel's ex (Noah, played by Martin Hendersen), whom she has enlisted to study the video tapes, finds that they don't have control tracks, he says that this makes the tapes not only practically impossible, but freakish. "To not have [a control track]," he explains "that's like being born without fingerprints."

Like the monstrous tapes, the television often appears as Samara's surrogate—in several scenes when we expect to see a ghost, we see a television set instead. In the most baffling of these scenes, Rachel is shut into a well after falling in. We see her inside the well, as the cover is slowly and purposefully closed, then the camera cuts to the exterior of the well to reveal, not a human form, ghostly or otherwise, but an unplugged, static-filled television. The television set leans against the well, apparently having just pushed the cover closed. In this moment, the set takes on an uncanny, personified element—we almost expect it to sprout cartoon arms and a roguish grin.

This strange personification of the television set is stressed by the film's characters when they find the barn that Samara lived in, with only a television for company, towards the end of her life. The tragedy of this abandonment is undercut by Noah's remark that Samara was "not alone" in the barn, as he glances meaningfully at the television. The way that the camera follows his gaze, lingering ominously on the television set, both frames the television as an agential being, and makes it clear that leaving Samara alone with it was far worse than leaving her completely alone—not because she could learn violence or evil from what she watched (the reason that she was locked in the barn was because she was already extremely violent, and apparently evil), but because she and the television could conspire.

The fact that Samara's closest relationship is with a television set literalizes the fears about children's relationship with technology that are present in both Postman and Prensky's arguments. It seems paradoxical to assume both that children are more susceptible than adults to violent media messages because they have difficulty learning to "suspend belief" (Postman 78), as Postman does,

and that they are technological geniuses with super-human computer minds, as Prensky does, but this seems to be precisely the mind-set of many American adults. "We must protect our children because they don't know how to tell what is real and what is not," they say, and, in the same breath (if more quietly), "we must protect ourselves, because our children might learn too much." The few horror stories of actual children who *do* take things that they find on the Internet or at the movies too literally (such as the Slender Man stabbing case in 2014) quickly become rallying cries, expressing the fear of children, technology, and their uncanny communion that we usually only find outlet for in fiction. They warn adults to keep children and technology apart, not just because one is a danger to the other, but because they understand each other too well, and we don't understand either.

Fears over technological precocity are often framed in protectionist terms, and the notion that screens are bad for children, while books are good, has become something of a cliché.[23] It seems horrifying to adults when a child can type her name, but not write it, but it's unclear if this is actually because she needs to be able to know how to physically write, or because the value system that this learning order implies places her in a technology-based world that is completely foreign to those who grew up without computers. Children, after all, are supposed to reproduce both genetics and culture, and so, when their culture is vastly different than that of their parents, they don't quite seem to be serving their purpose. "Digital natives" are alarming to their parents, then, because they aren't replicating cultures of learning and knowledge properly. A 1994 Op-ed piece in *The LA Times* states this fear more baldly, declaring that "Poisoning by media is even more harmful than poisoning by cigarettes or saturated fats, because it destroys not just individuals, but culture" (quoted in *Erotic Innocence* 186).[24] In other words, it's preferably for children to die than to fail to reproduce culture correctly.

When Prensky discusses the difference that he sees in modern youth, however, he isn't talking only about cultural reproduction. He believes that children's brains are actually, physically, different than their parents', that modern children may already be not quite human. Prensky plays into the dual fear and excitement about the plasticity of children's brains by utilizing narratives of language acquisition—children's brains, according to these narratives, are extraordinarily malleable, so their encounters with technology can literally shape them in a way that these encounters cannot shape adult brains.

While Prensky explains his use of the word "native" in terms of language acquisition—children born in the digital age are "native speakers" of digital languages, whereas older people will always have to learn them (1)—it is impossible to escape the word's other, colonialist meanings. The racialized subtext of Prensky's terminology becomes more clear because Prensky doesn't actually stick with his metaphor—"Digital Natives" carries different implications than "native digital speakers," especially when Prensky goes on to call the opposing category "Digital Immigrants" (2). While "immigrants" admittedly has a different meaning than "colonizers," and Prensky frames the immigrants as ridiculous in their unwillingness to change (mocking what he refers to as their "accents" in another weird, racialized moment),[25] the implication of racial difference and danger is the same. The framing of children as "natives" calls back to narratives of recapitulation, the widely accepted notion (from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century) that children repeated the evolutionary history of the species as they grew up. Children of "advanced" cultures, according to this theory, were like members of "less developed" cultures, and adult members of these "undeveloped" cultures remained child-like.[26] This framing of children as "natives" isn't new—what is interesting is that, while recapitulary childhood is "a state of the past" (both of the individual and humanity),[27] Prensky's new natives are decidedly native to the future.

In this narrative, children become not just racially other, but potentially of a new, and dangerous, species. The fear of children who are not quite like their parents is a cultural one, certainly, but children who are so different as to be barely recognizable as human challenge the very purpose of reproduction. According to Rebekah Sheldon, "[t]he child gives us back a future stripped of the very conditions that make urgent action necessary to being with: the unpredictability of amplifying fields of force. The threat of the future, in this sense, emanates from a notion inherent in the idea of the future that tomorrow may not resemble today, that is, that radical change is not only possible but is also continuously operating within the logic of self-similarity and as the condition of reproducibility" (40). The child gives us a future which, even if devastating, seems predictable, because "we" are still there. What happens, then, when children fail to resemble those who came before them? "Life is not what it was even a few decades ago' Sheldon says, 'and neither are the children who stand in its place" (ix). Children today, despite still being ideologically appealing as symbols of the future, also tread an uneasy line between futurity and monstrousness, between humanity and the nonhuman.

When films like *Poltergeist, Sinister,* and *The Ring* incorporate the spiritual into technology, put literal ghosts in the machine, they are incorporating a new fear into a narrative that is all too familiar. It is perhaps more comfortable to look at something as "magic" (and sinister magic, at that) than as something scientifically beyond our grasp. We are trading very real fears for mythological ones, that we know, in our heart of hearts, can't really be real. Our fear of technology is similar to the other phobias that have become subtly incorporated into our legends—like the xenophobia that influenced Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, technophobia seems to me primarily a fear of being replaced, by something that is different, yet eerily similar. The real fear, of course, is that "different, but similar" is code for "better." Who wouldn't rather be the immortal, powerful Dracula than the ridiculous, human Jonathan Harker? Even Frankenstein's monster (one of the first technological, or at least, scientific, monsters) is scary precisely because he is, in many ways, an improvement on humanity—not more beautiful, perhaps, but stronger, faster, more resilient, and maybe even smarter. The main reason that Victor Frankenstein refuses to create a female creature is that he thinks that if the two creatures reproduce, they will create a race of beings that could easily threaten to make humanity extinct.[28] Technology plays to these same fears—it will learn what we know, it will learn more, it will make us obsolete. Children also play to these fears, even in their most innocent guise. Perhaps technology and children are so closely linked not just because children understand technology better than we do, but because they activate the same fears. If they are now linked to technology instead of nature, children's strangeness is no longer tied to something cyclical that adults can easily understand, but is instead made completely foreign. Children, and technology, are the future—but not necessarily *our* future.

In his book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeff Cohen says that "Monsters are our children."[29] I would like to take this statement at face value— monsters are our children. They are the things that we have created, that we fear because they are different than us, and because they are more similar than we would sometimes like to admit, because they are stronger than us and will outlast us, because we fear that they will—because they *will*—replace us. Our modern monsters are not vampires (who are friendly now), ghosts, or even high-tech robots, but everyday technologies that almost everyone has (at least one of) in their home, and the human "others" who we fear replacing us are no longer from some far-off land, but are much more domestic. What is really frightening, though, is that these two forms of futuristic monster seem to be working together.

Technological monsters can enter, through the televisions in our bedrooms, while we sleep, and speak to the smaller monsters watching them, in a language that we cannot understand.

Notes

[1] The film's human antagonist is quick to point out that the graveyard is "not an ancient tribal burial ground, it's just—people," in a knowing wink to the horror tropes that the film goes on to subvert.

[2] While horror films and novels have long figured technology as a cause of horror (both literature and film can, in fact, place technology as one of their first villains, in *Frankenstein*), these recent horror films feature not mad scientists as their monsters, but technologies of media – technologies such as television, which can spread information easily/uncontrollably, rather than technology that can create literal monsters. While there are earlier films that play on fears of media technologies, like *Peeping Tom* (1960), these films focus on the way in which misuse of these technologies can create monsters, or on the ways in which monsters might misuse them—the technologies are not themselves portrayed as monstrous.

[3] *Poltergeist*. Dir. Tobe Hooper. Prod. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Heather O'Rourke. MGM, 1982. Film.

[4] Quoted in *The Transhumanist Reader*. More, Max and Natasha Vita-More, eds. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

[5] According to Lennard, "it was in the 1950s that the cinematic questioning of childhood innocence attained new force with a plethora of films of greater and lesser repute focusing on juvenile delinquency. It was in this period, and via these concerns, that child villainy achieved the currency and force that allowed it to solidify into an enduring horror theme" (21). While this is not inaccurate, it is oversimplified—since the publication of G. Stanley Hall's widely influential (if now understood to be extremely problematic) *Adolescence* in 1904, childhood and adolescence have generally been understood as distinct parts of life, with the latter being characterized as a time of rebellion, exploration (sexual and otherwise), and passionate and sometimes violent emotions, in direct contrast with the apparent "purity" of Romantic childhood. Adolescents are expected to behave threateningly; it seems incongruous and horrifying when a child does.

[6] Thompson, Kirsten Moana. *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*. New York: SUNY Press, 2007.

[7] Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

[8] Prensky, Marc. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 5 (2001). pp. 1-6.

[9] *The Bad Seed* (1956) introduced the idea of the cute, psychopathic, blonde child villain; it was based on a play of the same name that was first staged in 1954. In 1953, Jerome Bixby published his short story "It's a *Good* Life;" a *Twilight Zone* episode based on Bixby's story aired in 1961. Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt," perhaps the first popular story that explicitly commented on the threatening affinity between children and technology was first published in 1950. The 1960s and '70s saw more films about monstrous children appear, including *The Village of the Damned* (1960), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Omen* (1979).

[10] Films that do deal more explicitly with the internet are often aimed at younger audiences – *Unfriended* (2014) and *Host* (2020), for example, require their viewers to be media and tech-savvy in order to understand the film, and are meant to be viewed on computer screens. On the

opposite end of the spectrum, *The Age of Ultron* (2015), which presumably aims for a broader audience, basically requires that its viewers be totally ignorant of how the internet works to enjoy the plot.

[11] *Come Play* borrows from *The Babadook* (2014) (the monster, Larry, comes from a children's eBook), and from *Poltergeist* (it features a scene in which a television is thrown outside). Its monster, Larry, apparently "travels through electricity"—through lightbulbs, car lights, and screens (tv, iPad, phone), but it doesn't travel through anything that resembles the internet. The monster's presence is signaled by lights going on and off, and there's no suggestion that it could reach a place where there was no light—a dimmed computer screen, for example.

[12] Ashley's implied enjoyment of snuff films is also more shocking to audiences, of course, because she is a girl, and her gender also makes her a better candidate for truly horrifying evil child. Boys are often expected to enjoy violent play and media, and their "innocence" is often framed more as an ignorance of rules than as actual purity (thus the "boys will be boys defense" of everything from playground violence to frat party rapes). The trope of the female child as horror film villain, starting with *The Bad Seed's* Rhoda Penmark (and continued in *The Exorcist, The Shining, Carrie*, numerous other possession movies, and the films cited in this article) relies on the incongruity of the image of the small, white girl with the violent actions that she commits. Her corruption appears especially horrifying because of the apparent incompatibility of her appearance and her actions. According to Barbara Creed, the figure of the girl is "More rigidly socialised than the boy, in terms of external properties and proper 'civilised' behaviour, she is also expected to epitomise wordly innocence and sexual purity. When she crosses the boundaries between innocence and corruption, proper and improper behaviour, the ensuing violation seems more profound. When she falls, the hope of redemption is lost" ("Baby Bitches from Hell" 36). Picking up on the trope of the "fallen" woman, Creed suggests that, while viewers welcome redemption arches in stories of men and boys who behave badly, girls get no such chance.

[13] Kincaid, James R. "Forward: Sweet Demons – And Us." *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters: Essays on Cinemas Holy Terrors*. Eds. Markus P. J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015. 7-8.

[14] Kincaid, James R. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

[15] Turek, Ryan. "Shock Interview: Derrickson & Cargill On the Creation of Sinister, Its Bogeyman and Keeping It Scary." 8 October 2012. http://www.shocktillyoudrop.com/news/170305-shock-interview-derrickson-and-cargill-on-the-creation-of-sinister-its-bogeyman-and-making-it-scary/

[16] Faulkner, Sam. "Interview: *Sinister* writer C Robert Cargill." Screen Geek. 8 October 2012. http://www.screengeek.co.uk/features/article/interview-sinister-writer-c-robert-cargill

[17] Lennard, Dominic. Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors. Albany, US: SUNY Press, 2014.

[18] Samara's evil is linked, in *The Ring*, to her mother's excessive desire to have a child biologically. Throughout the film, we are told that Anna Morgan (Shannon Cochran) was "not meant" to have a child. The Morgans seem to have known this, since they apparently lied to neighbors about their daughter's origin—they claim that she's adopted, but according to one neighbor, this claim was always seen as suspect, since "they never did say from where." In a moment that's clearly supposed to be a big reveal, the film's heroine (Rachel, played by Naomi Watts) finds a birth certificate listing the Morgans as Samara's birth parents. Samara's father appears at this moment, screaming that his "wife was not supposed to have a child!", talks briefly about how much he hated the child that she did have, and quickly kills himself. A neighbor echoes the idea that Anna Morgan "wasn't supposed to have a child," saying that the Morgans "tried for years. Sometimes it's just not meant to happen." The implication is that the Morgans either travelled to Asia for experimental fertility treatments, surrogacy, or to make a deal with a literal devil, but, in language of the film, these three choices are the same, equally unnatural and unethical.

[19] Benson-Allot, Caetlin. "'Before you die, you see *The Ring'*: Notes on the Imminent Obsolescence of VHS." *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in The Ring*. Ed. Kristen Lacefield. 2010. New York: Routledge, 2016.

[20] While the threatening archaic mother has been discussed by psychoanalytic thinkers, most notably Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva, I am most influenced by Barbara Creed's feminist reading of this figure in *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993).

[21] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 1980. Trans. Louis-Ferdinand Céline. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

[22] Creed, Barbara. "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. 35-65.

[23] Today, new media is often likened to a drug, as in an alarmist 2016 *New York Post* headline that claimed that screens are "digital heroin," and "turn kids into psychotic junkies." Kardaras, Nicholas. "It's 'digital heroin': How screens turn kids into psychotic junkies." *The New York Post*. August 27, 2016. https://nypost.com/2016/08/27/its-digital-heroin-how-screens-turn-kids-into-psychotic-junkies/

[24] More recently, a more subtle version of this argument has often been advanced. Psychologist Peter Fonagy, for example, suggests that technology like cell phones and social media are dangerous because they allow kids to interact unmediated with other kids, while apparently limiting their time with adults—in other words, these new media disrupt the gatekeeping process, allowing children to learn from their peers, rather than from adults, and, perhaps, to create their own culture. Doward, Jamie, and Sam Hall. "Technology cuts children off from adults, warns expert." *The Guardian*. April 27, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/27/technology-threatens-child-development-psychology-expert-warns

[25] According to Prensky, "As Digital Immigrants learn – like all immigrants, some better than others – to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their 'accent' . . . There are hundreds of examples of the digital immigrant accent. They include printing out your email (or having your secretary print it out for you – an even 'thicker' accent); needing to print out a document written on the computer in order to edit it (rather than just editing on the screen); and bringing people physically into your office to see an interesting web site (rather than just sending them the URL). I'm sure you can think of one or two examples of your own without much effort. My own favorite example is the 'Did you get my email?' phone call. Those of us who are Digital Immigrants can, and should, laugh at ourselves and our 'accent'" (2).

[26] Gould, Stephen Jay. "Pervasive Influence." *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.

[27] Carl Jung, quoted in Gould 162.

[28] Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. 1831. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, Ltd, 1999. 127.

[29] Cohen, Jeff. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 20.

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