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## Monstrous Children, Gruesome Artistry, and Resisting Maturation in the *Sinister* Films

Michael C. Clody

Reminiscent of *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982) and in some ways inspired by *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002),<sup>1</sup> *Sinister* (Derrickson, 2012) and *Sinister 2* (Foy, 2015) feature children trapped within a technological medium that has the power to possess others. As *Sinister* and *Sinister 2* unfold, we learn that these children have filmed the elaborate murders they have perpetrated on their families as part of a ritualistic offering to the evil deity Bughuul, “the eater of children,” who then escorts them to a virtual realm within the films they have shot. Both *Sinister* films, however, are probably best known for their stunning incorporation of Super 8 snuff films. Using this by-then nostalgic form so well suited for memorializing family events, the snuff films subvert our expectations by documenting murderous perversions of traditional family rituals seen from the perspective of a deadly child—blending, for instance, moments from fishing outings, pool parties, holiday evenings, and church worship with torturously homicidal resolutions. Through the inclusion of these Super 8 reels, the *Sinister* films innovatively partake in the decade’s prevailing concerns with “found footage” forms and what Barry Keith Grant dubs the “new verité horror and sf film” (2013, 170), which centralizes the role of the camera in the diegetic universe of films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Sánchez and Myrick, 1999), *[Rec]* (Plaza and Balagueró, 2007), and *Troll Hunter* (Øvredal, 2010). The *Sinister* films are the terrible children of this trend, and, in these films, the footage is itself inhabited by a dark deity that gazes back with the power to possess the viewer.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to interviews, C. Robert Cargill wrote *Sinister* after a nightmare that followed his viewing of *The Ring* (Barone 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Not only does the disruptive emergence of this paranormal force suggest “a postmodern vacillation between our simultaneous faith in and fear of the truth claims of documentary images today” (Grant 2013, 170), but it also reflects contemporaneous concerns with how the media upon which we rely tracks, and even defines, its users. This ghost in the machine monitors its usage according to the needs of “corporate capitalism and neoliberal governance,” which is to say, in the terms of Xavier Aldana Reyes, that the “found footage” tradition reflects a cultural anxiety over how “information technologies – from the internet to mobile phones and CCTV cameras – have come not to serve our needs but to monitor and putatively shape our activities and sense of ourselves,” directly implicating our subjectivity within “the global flow of capital” (2015, 4-5).

While *Sinister* and *Sinister 2* immediately suggest that children are susceptible to the influence of violent imagery, they also contribute to the longer tradition of the monstrous child who perpetrates violence. According to Karen J. Renner's 2016 count, close to 600 movies "portrayed some kind of arguably evil child ... with almost 400 made in the new millennium" (1). Whereas the most salient example of the modern monstrous child might be found in *The Bad Seed* (LeRoy, 1956), the trope established a firm foothold in the following two decades, including such genre standards as *Village of the Damned* (Rilla, 1960), *Children of the Damned* (Leader, 1964), *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968), *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), and *The Omen* (Donner, 1976). Critical accounts of the role of these monstrous children date back to at least Robin Wood's classic "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" (originally published in 1978), which lists children as one of the primary figurations of the repressed; for Wood, the "otherness of children ... is that which is repressed within ourselves, its expression therefore hated in others" (2018, 79). More recently, Andrew Scahill has considered figurations of the monstrous child as an exaggeration *in extremis* of characteristics often ascribed to youth. Drawing heavily from the work of James Kincaid, Scahill asserts that the category of childhood is "neither self-evident nor natural" (2015, 13) and instead bears the nostalgic investments of the adults who speak for them—by considering childhood, for example, primarily as a time of innocence. In the words of Kincaid, the category of "the child" serves as "a repository of nostalgia and a hope for the future, weak and powerful, alluring and revolting" (qtd. in Scahill 2015, 14). As such, the concept of childhood is Janus-faced and flushed with nostalgia, both looking to the past (of what was) and the future (to what will be). According to this figuration, "looking forward to the possibilities of the future is a longing backward toward the promise once possessed by the past—a longing for inexperience, for potential rather than realized action, for an openness to the world based on a lack of worldliness" (Sobchack 1996, 149). Nostalgia blends with potential and, when monstrous, the child's refusal of the traditional coming-of-age narrative challenges the inherited values of the past while simultaneously threatening both the present and future. The monstrous child invokes a sense of loss of what could have been, one that T.S. Kord finds so palpable as to posit an element of *guilt* underlying the experience of horror (2016, 1–12).

The category of childhood often elicits nostalgia and, in the case of the two *Sinister* films, the horror of the murderous youths in some ways relies on a sense of lost potential (as they are "taken" in their youth) *and* a resistance to the standard "coming-of-age" narrative. In this context, it seems all the more

important that, like the lesser-known *Home Movie* (Denham, 2008), the directors put cameras into the children's hands and invite us to consider their snuff films in relation to the value of creative labour. Frozen in a virtual space *within* their artistic productions, these children diverge, for instance, from what Renner has termed "ghost children" or "possessed children," which form two of the categories examined in *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* (2016). For Renner, ghost children are implicated within an abusive "cycle of violence"; the "ghost child is even in the afterlife tormented by what he or she suffered" and frequently "demand[s] vengeance" (2016, 69–70), which is usually enacted through living children in the diegetic universe (ghost children, for example, are often "invisible friends" that inspire horrific acts). Possessed children are just as their moniker suggests, and in such cases the "child essentially becomes a puppet to a demonic entity" (95).<sup>3</sup> The *Sinister* films, however, present a more complex case: possessed by Bughuul, the children reside within the films they have created, and these films allow for their future manifestation and recruitment of devotees upon their viewing. Rather than simply documenting their violent histories (and thus answering questions about the cause of whatever haunting the horror ascribes to them), the snuff films are also the virtual space in which the children preside in a state of haunted stasis. The children seek dissemination and proliferation rather than justice; in their twisted home movies, they forever inhabit a nostalgic time of youth, and the Super 8 snuff films, personal in form yet gruesome in content, are artistic expressions that enact the destruction of the patriarchal family unit.

The murderous children of the *Sinister* films swerve from the dominant ideological demands of maturation and instead follow their own example, effectively becoming part of a creative community whose expression serves as an artistic disavowal of adult society. A macabre creative sense unites this ghostly, murderous child collective; when we see them together viewing a snuff film with a living child, we realize that, as in *Home Movie*, they are both directors and audience members, producing films only for themselves and the spirit that guides them. Permanently resisting adulthood, and seemingly neither living nor dead, they inhabit a liminal space, a complex and powerful example of Noel Carroll's description of the monstrous as "categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, categorically incomplete, or formless" (1987, 55). From this

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<sup>3</sup> For Renner, though, each category of evil child ultimately confirms her thesis that "evil children don't really exist in the popular imagination" and that "the history of evil child narratives has largely been a series of efforts to confirm the essential innocence of children" (2016, 7). Renner examines *Sinister* as a case of "possessed children" who ultimately function as cautionary tales about the importance of protecting children from "exposure to violence" (110–112).

liminal realm, their horrific artistic community rejects the capitalist demand that binds adult creativity to economic motivation; they will never find their “sublimated sexuality (creativity) ... sufficiently fulfilled in the totally noncreative and nonfulfilling labour (whether in factory or office) to which our society dooms the overwhelming majority of its members” (Wood 2018, 75). Moreover, each snuff film, in its cynical juxtaposition of idyllic family events with murderous conclusions, suggests that things could have been very different, just as the faces of the monstrous children, frozen in decaying youth, suggest the loss of something that could have been.

Given their complex temporal inflection, the children of these films are not simply monstrous; in their spectral presence, they are ghastly reminders of a form of artistic production that has been left behind with the passage into adulthood. In this sense, the spectral children of both *Sinister* and its sequel are neither simply ghosts that can be released when we discover the cause of their agony nor are they to be celebrated for their recurrence as an end in itself.<sup>4</sup> Rather, they are *no longer* but nonetheless compel creative imitations of their past actions and, in calling more gruesome artists to their ranks, refuse to enter a world wherein art is a bartered commodity. That is to say that, rather than maturing into members of a capitalist society, the “spectral child” serves not only as a passive repository for projected nostalgia—or even a sense of guilt—but also as a marker of foreclosed creativity and, thus, a sustained resistance to capitalism’s claim on artistic production. In fact, it is a crucial point of the films that the spectral children can only be seen by other children or, for the adult characters and audience, through—or within—the medium of film.<sup>5</sup> Both *Sinister* films, I will argue, track the power of their spectral children in relation to their gruesome artistry, both in its success and in its failures, and, in so doing,

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we might consider these children in the context of what Roger Luckhurst has dubbed the “spectral turn” and it is in following his example that I am here seeking a specific analysis of their role. Quoting Martin Jay, Luckhurst observes: “Unable to discriminate between instances and largely uninterested in historicity (beyond its ghostly disruption), the discourse of spectralized modernity risks investing in the compulsive repetitions of a structure of melancholic entrapment. In this mode, to suggest an inevitably historicized mourning-work that might actually seek to lay a ghost to rest would be the height of bad manners” (2002, 535).

<sup>5</sup> The most complicated version of this is in one of *Sinister*’s strangest moments, when Oswald awakens to somehow find himself *within* a film. In this case, he gets up after a camera’s light shines on his bed; he puts his hands to his head as if internally registering the sound of a buzzing projector as diegetic and extradiegetic sounds converge. While he investigates the house, he sees that the projector in his office is missing, and then, as he paces, his movements are choppy, as if being seen on roughly spliced film. His vision coincides with Super 8 shots of a ladder, which he then ascends to the attic where he encounters the children who watch a snuff film that features Bughuul. Bughuul is seen walking on the film screen until, suddenly, his face appears from inside the attic itself.

present an aesthetic challenge to the capitalist conscription of art. *Sinister* pits the paintings of a child against the marketability of a patriarch's creative labour, while *Sinister 2* suggests that a maternal restoration of old works, rather than their reproduction and expansion, contributes to a healthier family unit. And, just as the spectral children are encountered within the films they encourage their victims to imitate, *Sinister 2* comes to self-consciously reflect upon—and even resist—its own status as a sequel, thereby bristling against the demands of the box office.

The spectral children's power emerges when their snuff films are found in the homes of newly relocated families. The inaugural film opens with crime writer Ellison Oswalt (Ethan Hawke) having already decided, without the knowledge of his wife, Tracy (Juliet Rylance), to move his family into the very house that was the site of a terrible crime: the mass hanging of a family and the disappearance of a young girl. While researching these murders for his newest book project, Oswalt discovers a crate of reels in his attic that document a chain of murders leading up to his current investigation. After viewing the snuff films, however, he endures a series of strange occurrences that lead to family tension; unwilling to share his newfound knowledge, he privately consults with a local deputy ("Deputy So-and-So," played by James Ransone) and Dr. Jonas (Vincent D'Onofrio), a professor specializing in the occult. The symptoms of haunting intensify; we witness a group of ghastly children stalking Oswalt through the halls, for instance, and his daughter Ashley (Clare Foley) paints images of Stephanie, the young girl who went missing. Realizing the danger he has invited upon his family, Oswalt burns the found films and attempts to escape to their previous home, but we come to learn that it is too late: Ashley has already succumbed to the influence of Bughuul and his children, and, with a camera filming, murders the other members of the Oswalt family. After Ashley completes her baleful work, Bughuul transports her into the filmic realm where, presumably, she will reside until her vicious vignette finds its future viewer. In *Sinister 2*, the force of Bughuul emerges in a similar fashion when a young family—a mother, Courtney Collins (Shannyn Sossamon), and her twin boys, Dylan (Robert Daniel Sloan) and Zach (Dartanian Sloan)—finds refuge from an abusive husband/father, Clint (Lea Coco), in a property adjacent to a former church. The home and church host ghostly denizens, all of which are children who have partaken in mass killings of their families and now, caught once more in Super 8, seek to gain numbers by compelling Dylan to murder his brother and mother. As the narrative unfolds, we witness, in the young boy's nightmares, Dylan's engagement and ultimate resistance of the influence of

Bughuul and his votaries, but his brother succumbs—only to ultimately fail in his attempted murders and be destroyed with the film he attempted to shoot.

Both *Sinister* films give plentiful thematic attention to artistic production, and, during the first installment, the audience witnesses a slew of repeated references to creative work. The clear patriarch, Ellison moves his family despite their misgivings for his own book project, as he strives to pen another bestseller that will land the Oswalts a more permanent residence on “easy street.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, while writing this book, Ellison finds himself haunted by the spectral children as well as his past; he yearns not only to return to the massive commercial success of his first book, a true crime narrative entitled *Kentucky Blood*, but also to escape the failures of his successive monographs, which, in their misguided accusations, tore the social fabric of their relative communities and even released a murderer, a point quickly made by the Sheriff of his new town. Motivated primarily by his ego and financial aspirations, Ellison’s true crime writings have arisen as a middle ground between his own creative efforts (“No one likes my fiction,” he tells his wife) and the academic drudgery with which he would otherwise be employed. Within this framework, *Sinister* investigates meaningful and creative labour by offering a spectrum of artistic outlets, ranging from Ellison’s failed fiction to his textbook authorship, from his own true crime narratives to the illicit sketch by his son, Trevor (Michael Hall D’Addario), of the murders his father investigates. While Ellison and Tracy scold Trevor for his schoolroom drawing (which parallels the childish sketches of “Mr. Boogie” that Ellison finds in the attic), they encourage Ashley in her pursuit of painting. In fact, *Sinister* almost immediately calls attention to the parallels between the father and daughter’s artistic endeavours. As Ellison unpacks a box in Ashley’s room in the opening scene, he articulates his struggle with toil—writing textbooks, which he “can’t do”—and the work that he “needs” to do: the pursuit of his next great piece of nonfiction. Meanwhile, Ashley subtly reveals her unhappiness with the family’s move through her escapist painting of a child holding a balloon. Of course, in accordance with her parents’ “number one rule,” she paints *only* the walls in her room. The prohibition given to Ashley parallels Ellison’s own restriction, imposed by Tracy: the door to his office must remain locked at all times so as to prevent the material studied therein from being shared with the rest of the family.

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<sup>6</sup> The film further encodes Ellison as patriarch through Tracy’s references to his masculinity. In the film’s first spoken exchange, she, seeing him carry “just one small box,” declares him a “sissy”; later, after declaring her reticence for his current project, she tells him to “go kick some ass” as she sends him off to work.

In fact, as Ashley's juvenile paintings spill out into the rest of the house, Ellison's psychological distress—and the spectral threat—intensifies, suggesting a deeper tension between the father and daughter's creative production. Initially, the relationship between Ashley and her father manifests as mutual admiration, as he compliments her newly drawn paintings of unicorns on the walls, and she reveals her desire to “paint something really good” so she'll “be famous like [Ellison].” The next time we see Ashley painting, she has moved to the kitchen where she learns how to make coffee for her rather particular father, immediately following the scene in which Ellison first recognizes Bughuul's face in the films he views in his office. When Ashley appears on screen again, she huddles in terror while staring at the ghastly Stephanie, who we learn to be the murderous daughter who previously inhabited the house, and now an image from the first snuff film adorns her wall: four hanged and hooded bodies juxtaposed with a portrait of Bughuul. Meanwhile, her father patrols the house while the spectral children—the murderers of the five families Ellison investigates—silently haunt the halls behind him. Minutes later, Ashley's art has taken over a wall outside her room; she has painted Stephanie, swinging on a tire,<sup>7</sup> on the door to her brother's room. We come to understand that *Sinister's* conclusion ironically realizes the film's subtle promises of artistic acknowledgement; Ashley, able to drug and incapacitate her father by bringing him a laced coffee, will fulfill her oath: “Don't worry, Daddy. I'll make you famous again,” she states, axe and camera in hand. The family is slaughtered, the house's walls are splattered in heinous perversions of her childish images—there is, for instance, a bloodied unicorn on one of the walls—before Ashley scrawls one last picture and joins Bughuul and the murderous children in suspended virtuality. Ashley's art has now taken over the home in direct repudiation of her parents' rule and even the spatial restriction upon Ellison's own intellectual labour; her snuff film, “House Painting,” has been created.

Painting other rooms, however, had already been suggested as a phrase for another possible futurity. *Sinister* presents this potential most saliently when Tracy learns the house they inhabit served as the site of the past murders and argues with her husband about his selfish perception of his legacy. “Writing,” Ellison claims, “is what gives my life meaning ... These books are my legacy,” to which Tracy responds: “Your kids are your legacy.” The lines of this argument with Tracy clarify the ideological stakes of the film: either to be happy

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<sup>7</sup> In the snuff film shot by Stephanie, we see not only the tire swing but also the young murderess swinging from the body of a hanged family member, suggesting that the horrific murders are, in some sense, a form of “play.”



with being a father and, thus, to accept the perceived drudgery of academic labour, or to prioritize his individuality and creative impulse, itself implicating him within heteronormative patriarchal ideological demands. When he realizes the error of his judgment, it is already too late; Ellison's attempt to preserve his creativity while under financial pressure has led to the demise of the family. The way out, it seems, has been foreclosed; just like his family cannot safely return to the home after they have left it behind, so too does Ellison find it impossible to reverse his direction and recover the past hope of a family. The point is poignantly made when, after the argument, Ellison sips whiskey as he watches old interviews—themselves partially worn and degraded, implicitly from oft-repeated viewings—and contemplates his past. These television interviews, part of the promotional circuit during the successful run of *Kentucky Blood*, portray a young idealist who claims he would rather cut off his hands than write “for fame and money.” In one of these clips, his younger self answers the interviewer's question about whether he plans to have a family:

I don't know. If you'd asked me a year ago, I might have said, “No, never. I'm a career man.” But you know how it goes. You meet someone. You get a little older. All of a sudden, your career doesn't seem to matter so much. You want kids. You start to see other people with kids and think “I want that” and then you wonder, “Huh. Is he gonna look like me? Is she gonna look like her?” You paint rooms in your head...

At that point, with Ellison drifting off to sleep, Tracy stops the recording. If the horror of *Sinister* works on some level by juxtaposing peaceful family outings with murderous conclusions, then the clips Ellison views work in a similar way: they are a space to recognize lost potential, a time to experience the death of an unrealized optimism about an ideal family life that has not come to fruition. The art that the characters produce does not merely serve to capture—a moment, an idea, or even the killer behind Oswald's current book project—but also, nostalgically, to lament that which never was. In this way, the aesthetic violence of the snuff films stands as a horrific memorial to lost potential and allows the terrible children to express their ultimate rejection of maturation by giving their youth, through and *in art*, to Bughuul. The aesthetic principle is “revolting” in Scahill's double sense of “repellent” and as a body “in revolt” (2015, 5), violently rejecting the standard coming-of-age narrative within a capitalist grid.

The wear of the tapes Ellison watches offers material evidence of his repeated attempts to return to the distant moment of past potential, yet this is only one instance of *Sinister's* reliance on degraded media to convey lost hope.

In fact, by focusing on the compelling soundtrack and the snuff films, Jessica Balanzategui accounts for the way Derrickson's film often binds lost hope to horror through its use of "hauntology" (in the term's musical sense). Hauntology, a recent music genre so dubbed by Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher, includes bands that "use a combination of digital and analogue equipment to construct ambient soundscapes evocative of technological degradation and obsolescence" (Balanzategui 2016, 242). Balanzategui continues: "hauntologists intermix past and present while also rendering the sense of temporal distance between them strangely stretched and impenetrable. As Andrew Burke describes it, in hauntology the 'analogue remnants of the recent past are digitally reprocessed and reconfigured in a way that amplifies their force, menace, and strangeness'" (242). Reprocessing, for example, can introduce a "crackle" in the sound, "which renders time as an audible materiality" (Fisher 2012, 18). In *Sinister*, hauntology "augment[s] the aesthetics of technological malfunction and degradation in a way that casts a dark pall over optimistic notions of progress" (Balanzategui 2016, 243). Indeed, the decay of 8mm strongly contrasts with the "crispness and immateriality of digital media" (240) while its contents offer their own tension: between the family gatherings captured in the "warm medium" of Super 8 (as some view its Sepia tones) and the horrendous murders being depicted. The snuff films, that is, reveal a "folding together of the warm and the dark, family idyll and graphic violence, nostalgia and uncanny dread" (241) that "coils homely and unhomely together in inextricable ways" (244). The effect of the soundtrack then, particularly apparent in the sounds wedded to images, creates what Balanzategui terms "haunted nostalgia," an aural field that emphasizes lost potential.

While the original film contemplates creative production and meaningful work in a capitalist society, *Sinister 2* seeks an escape from the brutal violence of an unhinged father and business mogul, thus drawing a parallel between the first film's unfulfilling labour and the second's explicit patriarchal violence. During the course of *Sinister 2*, Courtney Collins and her two sons, running from an abusive husband/father, find help in the character of (the now-former) Deputy So-and-So, who assisted Ellison's doomed project (and, for that, lost his job). The Former Deputy converges on the Collins' temporary home while on a solitary mission to conclusively break Bughuul's chain of killings by burning down any houses in which he discovered they occurred. This backstory reveals that the paranormally motivated killings have occurred and continue to occur outside the serial murders presented in *Sinister*, and, as we will later learn, even include global incidents. The sequel thus shifts from discovery (of the cause of

the crimes) to escape (of an abusive father and the spectral children) and, as we will see, from the composition of detective fiction to the matter of dreams.

While *Sinister*'s narrative subtly incorporates art and artists in its narrative, director Ciaran Foy's vision for the sequel brings the motif of artistic production to the fore. In *Sinister 2*, for instance, we learn that an artistic oblation plays a key part in the rites of Bughuul when Former Deputy So-and-So visits Dr. Stomberg (Tate Ellington), who has replaced the first film's Dr. Jonas as expert on the occult. Stomberg tells us that he has been forwarded some of his predecessor's belongings, including a radio that continues to transmit the "Norwegian Hell Call." As if featured on some dark numbers station, this HAM radio message has randomly recurred for some twenty years, each time eerily broadcasting a series of coordinates before a young Swedish girl asks her soon-to-be-murdered mother to be quiet so that Bughuul can hear the piano she begins to play. There are, then, a set of killings in Europe that share the same characteristics of the homicides tracked in *Sinister*, including a murdered family and a missing child. But then we learn one more crucial fact that makes the sequel's inherited artistic motif explicit: each killing includes "a thematic offering"—literature, an image, or a piece of music, for instance—and they function, in the words of the Dr. Stomberg, as an "aesthetic observance of violence." Not only does this tip off Former Deputy So-and-So that the missing children are the perpetrators of the violence (a point his character would not have known from his experience in the initial *Sinister*), but it also explains the necessity of the snuff films as aesthetic offerings to Bughuul. The Former Deputy, that is, here discovers what Professor Jonas talks around during the first film's mythology lesson:

Early Christians believed that Bughuul actually lived in the images themselves and they were gateways into his realm ... The ancient Church believed that he would take possession of those who saw the images and cause them to do terrible things. Or in some cases he could even abduct the viewer into the images themselves.

The offerings to Bughuul become his trans-temporal home; bracketed from strict chronological progression, the dark spirit inhabits a liminal virtuality, and, in so doing, the power of these snuff films join classical anxieties over idolatry with modern apprehensions with media dissemination that we find in horror precedents such as *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998) and *Poltergeist*. Yet the *Sinister* films enlarge these films' concern with a child's consumption of media to include a critique of the ideology that governs the value of creative labour.

In the *Sinister* films, the children offer themselves to Bughuul and become denizens of his phantasmagoric netherworld, trapped emblems of a past foreclosed while on the very cusp of potential. The children exist only as cracked and faded spectres of their former selves; in the words of Balanzategui, their bodies, which bound through the halls behind Ellison or goad the young Dylan, “visually [refract] the sonic aesthetics of hauntology” as children who “once embodied nascent futures, but are now trapped forever in the analogue past, and decay has replaced their growth: ‘sadly, the future is no longer what it was’” (2016, 249). When the spectres surface, they seek to compel other children to repeat the violence of the past, together personifying a compulsion to repeat that fates the next generation to utterly refuse coming of age and instead inhabit a distinct, liminal futurity that precludes the promise of final rest.

In fact, *Sinister 2* emphasizes the absence of future salvation in the home in which Dylan and his family seek refuge; the property has a chapel that, rather than offering a promising vision of the end, inspires hallucinations of the horrific crimes it has already housed: the murders perpetrated by Milo (Lucas Jade Zumann), the ringleader of the sequel’s haunted youth. Milo’s snuff film fleshes out the loss of faithful optimism; what begins with flashes of worship in a small church, including the ritual consumption of the Host, quickly cuts to a disturbing ring of prone bodies with legs bound and hands nailed into the floor, and each victim has what looks to be a silver bowl latched to its stomach. After a moment, rats are summoned to race across the floor and into the containers, and when Milo places a hot coal on top of the now-inverted bowl, the rodent pursues its only escape: down, chewing through the victim’s body. The family that had shared communion in faith finds themselves offered as flesh to rats, a corporeal testament to lost salvation. Milo thus stands as ringleader of this group of youths who once more represent lost potential futures stalled in haunted stasis.

However, the abandoned church also serves as Courtney’s workspace, wherein she plies her trade in furniture restoration. While the faded children of the past inhabit the present through their ritualistic compulsion to repeat, Courtney’s aesthetic model offers a stark contrast: she revitalizes worn objects from the past, a reparative process that subtly offers Dylan a model different from both the productions of the monstrous children and the brutal capitalist incentives of his father. While the children claim others for their entropic virtual archive, Courtney gives value back to that which had faded in time. Significantly, director Foy explicitly presents Courtney’s craft, like Ellison’s, in relation to parenting. After an awkwardly scripted laugh about her wish that Former Deputy So-and-So be the father to her boys—a point made after he identifies

with Dylan's experience of an abusive dad—the conversation turns to Courtney's work in “antique restoration.”

Courtney: Feels almost magical to turn something worn out into something that's, something that's beautiful again. You know, like polished and ... and worthwhile. Something that's going to be here long after you're gone.

Former Deputy So-and-So: Yea. Like kids.

Courtney: Yea, like kids.

The implications are twofold: the conversation invokes the traditional procreative metaphor for the work of art while simultaneously buying into the fantasy of a mortal afterlife in those things you create; her family's future depends on fleeing an abusive patriarch and somehow fixing the past, of re-starting. The correlation with the first film's tension between husband and wife over Ellison's legacy emerges, and the lines of Courtney and the Former Deputy's dialogue progress quickly, and suggestively, from restoration to legacy and children. While Ellison failed to commit fully to imagining rooms other than his own, Courtney redefines the space of the chapel in order to restore the potential of faded objects—rather than adding, for instance, another film to the series.

In this context of art, youth, and potential, the Super 8 scenes that open *Sinister* and *Sinister 2* take on even greater significance. *Sinister* opens with a static crackle and whir and then an image of four hooded bodies strung up on a tree, their feet on the ground, while a red sprocket hole calls attention to the media's materiality. Slowly at first, the bodies begin to rise into the air as a pole saw cuts through a heavy counterbalancing branch, and then the deep ominous tones of the accompanying audio track are replaced by the sounds of a film reel's flipping tail; the title appears in somewhat childish scrawl, a few final frames quickly cycle through, and the screen goes black. *Sinister 2* opens with a similar scene: a Super 8 shot, marked again with a red perforation mark on the left, shows us three hooded bodies bound to crucifixes; then, a hand drops a cigarette lighter, setting in motion a line of flame that will set the middle cross ablaze. When *Sinister 2* opens in a way so similar to its predecessor, the audience is naturally led to expect that this was a murder that has already taken place; after all, both films bear the mark of a sprocket hole that indexes the medium's physicality and thus identifies both scenes as having the same diegetic status in relation to what will occur in the coming narrative. But in the sequel, the clip ends by collapsing the filmic vision into the scene of a character's bedroom during his nightmare,

undercutting the legitimacy of the viewer's expectation. This snuff film, that is, does not *yet* exist in *Sinister 2*—it is, instead, a boy's nightmare straining toward the prophetic—and, when the young Dylan awakens, Bughuul paces slowly forth from the depths of the closet. Now Foy pushes the limits of the fiction before us: Dylan, terrified in bed, lies next to a ghastly version of himself, conveying temporal multiplicity. The ghostly double, that is, presents both a Dylan that *was*, having decayed, while the opening dream's snuff film suggests a Dylan that *would be*, as the one who will carry out the actions of that nightmare. The stress on the bounds of possibility (how can a character be haunted by a future version of himself that does not exist?) presents the odd coexistence of the present and the virtual, of the *no longer* and the *not yet*. But it also has narrative implications when, in the next scene, we see Dylan with his twin brother, Zach, effecting yet another sense of doubling that recommends a psychological interpretation of what is to follow. *Sinister 2* continues to summon the audience's interpretative efforts in what will total three dream sequences that track the boy's psychological battle with Bughuul, for Dylan can only suppress the spectre in the dreamscape.

The nascent potential of the dreams that the nightmare's internal film somehow captures—i.e., the murders Dylan perceives—announces a conflict within the virtual. Dylan's dreams at times parallel or even duplicate the movie we watch, yet, at other times, they offer an unfulfilled or denied vision. The complexity of the interactions within the diegetic, and between the diegetic and extradiegetic, necessitates a concise description of each of *Sinister 2*'s dreams. They are:

1. First Dream Sequence: panning shot across three hooded figures on crucifixes; a lighter falls to the ground, and its flame sets the father's crucifix ablaze; then three crucifixes are on fire. Dylan awakens in bed, Bughuul walks out of his closet, and his doppelganger appears next to him.
2. Second Dream Sequence: shots of the aftermath of the murders perpetrated by Milo and captured by his snuff film; there is the flashing image of a record player; Dylan, in a bloodied hallway, witnesses his father physically abuse his mother; cut to a trail of flame at the site of the murders, the cornfield, and then to the spinning reels and light of a projector; a handheld camera is lifted from the ground, and then Zach and his mother are fleeing, pursued, through the cornfield; images of the burning crucifixes; finally, Dylan stands with a scythe in his hand.

3. Third Dream Sequence: Dylan walks through bloodied halls; he witnesses his father physically abusing his mother before fleeing and locking himself in a room with a projector that plays portions of the chapel snuff film; Bughuul watches him, a red light briefly shines from the left and, upon its retreat, *the dream degrades to a Super 8 shot of Dylan*, who looks down to find a scythe in his hand; he screams, the projector skips, and he awakens.

Taken together, the dreams present a multivalent interplay of fictive levels, haunting Dylan with a repetitive, sub-diegetic cycle; dreams may repeat dreams (e.g., the traumatic site of an abusive father); dreams might include elements of the snuff films (e.g., their use of the chapel snuff film); dreams can forecast elements of the film we watch, *Sinister 2* (e.g., mother and son escape in the cornfield, even if the specific shot differs slightly). Most significantly, however, when the dreams present an image of Dylan screaming in Super 8, or when they show us three burning crucifixes in the cornfield, they go so far as to present a portion of a film that does not exist for the viewers of *Sinister 2*. In fact, a principal element of the plot is that Dylan *will not complete those dreamt of murders*; indeed, his twin brother, Zach, attempts the crimes, but even he fails to complete his aesthetic offering (Former Deputy So-and-So strikes the camera from his hand) and the full range of murders (he manages to set only his father ablaze, while Courtney and Dylan escape). Only in Dylan's opening dream do all three crosses burn; thus, *Sinister 2* opens by offering its audience a film that does not exist, despite the mechanical sounds and the Super 8 cuts; what does occur as the narrative unfolds frustrates the promise made to the audience. That film, the one that does not exist, could have only come to fruition if Dylan had sacrificed his will to the fateful call of the spectral children.

In this way, *Sinister 2* dramatizes the resistance to repeat on dual planes: Dylan's individual resistance of the compulsion to "create" is doubled by *Sinister 2*'s own refusal to repeat the film to which it serves as a sequel, conveyed most clearly in an opening scene that offers, only to ultimately deny, a film-that-never-was. If the *arche* of compulsion virtually "exists"—as a spectral haunting that does not manifest as a positivity—then the suppression of the film-that-never-was dramatizes an attempted erasure and redirection of the compulsive drive. Some repetition, of course, often stands as the driving principle in any franchise, but particularly in sequels to slashers, wherein creativity finds expression in the variety of violence rather than the plotline. As John Carpenter puts it: "Basically, sequels mean the same film. That's what people want to see. They want to see the same movie again" (qtd. in Clover 1992, 10). The opening of *Sinister 2*, then, offers precisely this kind of similarity to the audience in its imitation of its

predecessor's opening scene. Just so, the sequel draws attention to the inherent repetitions not only in the serial snuff films created by the murderous children, but also in its real-world debt to its precursor, which, as Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues, calls upon the audience's own compulsion to repeat:

Freud examines the process by which subconscious forces compel individuals to repeat events over and over again regardless of how painful or traumatic these events may be. It appears to me that a similar repetition-compulsion underlines sequelisation, in so far as the sequel taps into a particular cultural urgency to memorialise, interact with and perhaps alter the past. (2012, 9)

Sequels summon the “audience to engage and predict the narrative in new (yet highly familiar) contexts” (10). For Jess-Cooke, the sequel creates a “second ending of an ‘original’” and, in so doing, imposes an “enforced retro-interpretation and continuation” that may even account for the audience's disappointment (vii). In reframing the prototype, the sequel frustrates the audience's anticipated repetition of the same.

When Dylan screams to rupture his final dream, his independence erupts from an otherwise fated cycle of repetition; he breaks the oneiric Super 8 film and simultaneously upsets the audience's experience of *Sinister 2*'s beginning as well as our expectation for its conclusion. The film-that-never-was stands as a promise that will not be honored, and the audience instead watches a disrupted and then re-scripted version that gives the role originally afforded Dylan to his brother, Zach, whose violent tendencies clearly imitate those of his abusive father. The denial of our expectations invites us to consider both the film's beginning as well as its (extra-diegetic) origin. While sequels demand, in some sense, an imitative return, *Sinister 2* strives for an impossible erasure of its source, one that parallels the strife of Dylan's resistance and Zach's failed attempt to join the spectral children. While the inaugural film contemplates the binding of creative production to economic motivations, the sequel's production was itself immersed in box office economics—it was, in fact, funded on the hope of a large gross, given the success of its precursor (and its disappointing performance prevented a third installment). *Sinister 2*, that is, engages a compulsion to repeat that it, unlike Dylan, cannot ultimately escape.

Despite the continuation of the abusive cycle manifested in Zach's murder of his father, the arc of the sequel is uniquely redemptive. Dylan finds a futurity that neither repeats the brutality of his father nor enacts the grisly art of the spectral children. While his capitalist father's house burns in the background,



Dylan proclaims his love for his mother. According to the narrative's logic, the cycle of violence housed behind him has now been broken, and Dylan instead turns more fully to his mother's project of restoration rather than his father's brutal patriarchy; after all, it was in his mother's workspace that Dylan finally broke free of the spectral children's spell. In this way, the conclusion's hope is recuperative; it lies not in a salvific future moment—indeed, the spectral children threaten young inhabitants with virtual, static futures—but in the reclamation of the past; in Dylan's case, the cycle of abuse cannot simply be erased, but perhaps, with care, his past's future can be restored and redirected. Hope is not found in the church's promise of redemption but in the work of restoration—and, more explicitly in the sequel, the canceled determination and then re-creation—of the past's future.

In this shift to restoration as a mode of engaging the past, *Sinister 2* radicalizes and internalizes the problem of its own gruesome artistry. By offering, and then denying, a replica of its predecessor, the sequel seeks to duplicate, on an extra-diegetic level, the restorative project of Courtney. At the same time, however, this denial presents an extraordinary engagement with the central concerns of the first film: what is found in the lost footage is a form of artistry that refuses to embrace the demands of the marketplace. By attempting to end the beginning, it challenges its own role as sequel in such a way that may have upset the expectations of the box office by denying the audience a return to the original. Yet this denial honors the logic of the first film: horrific artistry that resists maturation according to the demands of the capitalist market.

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