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Insidious and the Return of the Negligent Parent: the Elm Street Kids Come of Age

by David Christopher

Horror films that highlight adolescent nightmares and negligent parents have come a long way in thirty years. In the late 1970s, Robin Wood was succinct in positioning the family as the location of normalcy in twentieth-century horror film (Wood 201). In the mid-1990s, Tony Williams agreed that “all horror films, in one way or another, are family horror films” (Williams 168). At that same time, Vivian Sobchack states that the “American bourgeois family” drama in science-fiction and horror narratives is specifically “marked by . . . disintegration and transfiguration” (Sobchack 144). Pat Gill expands on Sobchack’s observation with an omnibus survey of horror films in which he sees the tribulations suffered by teens in late twentieth-century slasher films as a cinematic metaphor for the fears of the divorce generation characterized by “deficient parents” that “are hapless and distracted, unaware of their children’s problems and likely to dismiss or discount their warnings and fears” (17). Gill specifically refers to the teenage nightmares and lacking parental guidance and protection in the Nightmare on Elm Street films (26-28). Late twentieth-century classics such as John Carpenter’s Halloween, Friday the 13th, Clive Barker’s Hellraiser, and Wes Craven’s A Nightmare on Elm Street feature fantastical spectacles. More recent films that have inherited the negligent parent theme such as Hostel (2005), Turistas (2006), and even Human Centipede (2010) abandon these spectacular fantasies. Moreover, these later films efface parents from the narrative entirely and feature already independent young adults in the graphically violent realism of their terror and torture. James Wan’s Insidious (2010) appears to be a nostalgic anomaly—a post-modern palimpsest of intertextuality that longs for horror conventions of the past. In a nostalgic revision of the themes articulated by Pat Gill, Insidious recodes the negligent parents of the Elm Street generation as exclusively female in both the malevolent netherworld and the normative bourgeois family protagonists.

To facilitate this analysis of Insidious, this paper will use three distinct trajectories. First, this analysis will read Insidious as the type of nostalgic pastiche articulated by Fredric Jameson in “Postmodernism and
Consumer Society.” Jameson claims that nostalgic fantasy “satisfies a deep (might I even say repressed?) longing to experience them again” (197). Jameson’s reference to the repressed is particularly relevant in a discussion of Insidious. In that context, the second trajectory of this analysis will draw upon psychoanalytical theories regarding fantasy, the “return of the repressed,” and “the mirror stage” to unpack the depictions in Insidious as indicative of the psychology through which nostalgia is realized and extended, especially as it relates to the repression of parental authority during the formative stages of subjectivity. Lastly, these analyses will be framed in Pat Gill’s understanding of the 1980s slasher cycles as indicative of a suburban anxiety regarding negligent parents in an era of rising middle-classed and bourgeois divorce rates.

Insidious follows the horrific misadventures of a young bourgeois couple, Josh and Renai Lambert, as their home is infiltrated by myriad malevolent demons via the window of their inexplicably comatose son Dalton’s astral link with their netherworld. Not since Poltergeist (1982) has any popular horror film dealt with the cinematic metaphor of child abduction. Unlike Poltergeist, however, Insidious leaves the body of the abducted child in the realm of reality and the malevolent agents of “The Further” abscond with only his soul (Insidious). Following revelations from Josh’s mother that Dalton has inherited his ability to project his consciousness into this netherworld, it becomes evident that only Josh is capable of following Dalton into “The Further” to effect his rescue. In doing so, the family risks opening a portal that will allow the army of tortured souls populating “The Further” to roam freely into the Lambert’s home. Josh manages to escape with Dalton just in time, but not before he is possessed by a demonic mother attempting to appropriate Josh’s body since his early childhood.

This narrative is replete with intertextuality that is nostalgic for the conventions of late twentieth-century horror films and that navigates a diverse palimpsest of horror classics. Jameson describes postmodern intertextuality as a form of pastiche that has been evacuated of its parodic impulses (Jameson 194-95). Lacking the cohesion of an assumed dominant style, intertextual reference has no norm against which to level satire. Rather than attack postmodern intertextuality on this level, Jameson introduces the concept of nostalgia as its function. In addition to Insidious’ allusion to Poltergeist, the excessive reliance on startling visual shocks that punctuate the narrative is reminiscent of such monster classics as Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979). The bumbling assistants to the matriarchal medium that assists the Lamberts are an allusive combination of the Frog Brothers in the Lost Boys and the heroes of Ghostbusters with their semi-scientific devices and comic bickering. In “The Monstrous Years: Teen Slasher Films and the Family,” Pat Gill refers to late twentieth-century slasher worlds as “school hallways, the hometown streets, . . . and the bedrooms of its victim,” all of which are featured in Insidious (Gill 19). The black and white family of motionless wraiths Josh encounters in “The Fur-
“Pop/Corn”

The “Further” is a horrific parody of the 1950s television family in the language of its contemporary series *The Twilight Zone*. Their eerie motionlessness specifically references the 1960 *Twilight Zone* episode “Elegy” in which three astronauts find themselves in the midst of an otherwise idyllic rural village made terrifying by the inanimate populace. The semi-inanimate family Josh first meets in “The Further” demonstrate Gill’s observation of the slasher film’s mockery of the myth of 1950s bourgeois domestic bliss in a series of graphic tableaux. A father, daughter, and mother, dressed in antiquated habiliment and coated in horrific make-up parody an eerie 1950s domestic scene. These idealized families are now frozen in “a place without time as we know it” and are depicted as horrific ideological misrepresentations of family life (*Insidious*). The relentless and clownishly evil grin on a second daughter’s face remains frozen on her face in the next tableau in which she has dispatched the other three members of her family with a hunting rifle. So much for domestic harmony.

The most striking resemblance is the nightmarish labyrinth of “The Further” in *Insidious* to the dreamscapes in the *Elm Street* films. The Victorian industrial feel of Dalton’s prison room in “The Further” might be read as a ghostly allusion to Freddy Krueger’s boiler room in the *Elm Street* films. Moreover, horror actress icon Lin Shaye, who plays a school teacher in the first *Elm Street* movie, also plays the role of the (much older) clairvoyant (and only fatal victim) in *Insidious*. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of *Insidious*’s direct reference to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is, as cinema would have it, a visual one.¹ In a scene where Josh’s mother recounts her encounter with the demon holding Dalton captive (in a dream, no less), the visual realization of the demon (Figure 1) is a clear homage to the promotional composite still used for the first of the *Elm*
Street movies (Figure 2). Is all of this nostalgia merely empty intertextuality—a post-modern “pastiche” without “parody” (Jameson 194-95)?

The cinematic nostalgia in Insidious acts as a spectacular patina over the film’s ideological project. Insidious acts as a nostalgic fantasy of displacement that allows the Elm Street generation of moviegoers to repress the responsibility of their own negligent parenting. Insidious’ nostalgia is clearly aimed at the audiences of the horror cycles of the late 1970s through the early 1990s. This audience, come of age, is loosely reflected in the 30-something protagonists of the film. The slasher genre of the late twentieth century featured predominantly adolescent protagonists: Laurie Strode in Halloween, Nancy Thompson in A Nightmare on Elm Street, Kirsty Cotton in Hellraiser, etc. Gill observes that “[w]hat is striking about most of these films is the notable uselessness of parents, their absence, physically and emotionally, from their children’s lives” (17). Gill suggests that these fears have been generated by the assault on the mythology of bourgeois domestic harmony experienced in the transition of family structures under increasing rates of divorce (18). Similarly, more recent horror films feature predominantly post-adolescent protagonists. Insidious is conspicuously empty of any adolescent characters.

The audience members at whom Insidious is aimed have become the negligent parents that Gill refers to in “The Monstrous Years,” now robbed of their adolescent tragedy and facing the same indictments Gill ascribes to their own parents. In a statement that might equally apply to the plight of Dalton in Insidious as to the characters in the films to which Gill refers, he states that “the decay of the family makes children not merely defenseless but also prone to danger” (21). As the isolated and terrorized teens of the earlier films, and the teen audiences to which they appealed came of age, there was no catharsis or escape; as they became parents themselves, the family crisis reproduced itself. Other recent horror films, such as Hostel (2005), Turistas (2006), and Human Centipede (2010), still populated by young adults in peril, articulate fears of a younger generation—the children of the now grown Elm Street generation. Now in the role of parents, the Elm Street generation has been alienated by the new series of films in which their unresolved anxieties are not addressed, but in which they face the accusations of neglect the older films placed on their own parents. The contemporary news media acted to remind these new parents of this transfer of responsibility. Recent media sensations regarding negligent parents have focused on the coming of age scenario. In 2009, the media was flooded with revelations of the discovery of a child abducted almost 20 years prior. In 2011, The New York Times summarized that “Jaycee Lee Dugard was kidnapped as an 11-year-old in 1991 by Phillip Garrido, who kidnapped, raped and held her captive for nearly two decades . . . Ms. Dugard was dragged into a car on her way to a bus stop as her stepfather [Carl Probyn] watched helplessly from the family home” (Jaycee). “Initial suspects included Probyn and Ken
Slayton, Dugard’s biological father” (Raman). In January 2013, Nation Now reported that in the case of Jonbenet Ramsey, murdered in her home in 1996, “a grand jury had indicted the 6-year-old’s parents in 1999” but were unable to follow through with a conviction (Pearce). For decades, “[s]uspicion swirled around the parents, as did tabloid headlines” (Pearce). The increasingly graphic teen torture in more recent horror films, almost always by a member of the previous generation, in conjunction with media sensationalism of neglected children that (would) have come of age opened old wounds. Both recent horror film and the media worked in concert to accuse the Elm Street generation of the negligence they had comfortably located as the responsibility of their own parents.

To facilitate the generational displacement of anxieties regarding negligent parenting, the narrative in Insidious highlights the absence or neglect of the 30-something parents. Early in the narrative, Josh and Renai share an exchange in which Josh’s absence and negligence is central. Josh is unable to transport the kids neither to nor from school because of a pre-scheduled PTA meeting about which he failed to inform his wife. Josh returns home well past dark. Shortly thereafter, an unsupervised young Dalton receives a head injury while exploring the family’s dilapidated attic. It is this incident in which the demon first gains access to Dalton and makes him the gateway through which malevolent forces from “The Further” can infiltrate the Lambert home. While Renai is composing music and Josh is at work, one of the demons infiltrates their infant daughter’s bedroom. Renai is only made aware of the invasion via the baby monitor on a different level of the home. As the frequency of paranormal activity increases in the house, Josh remains conspicuously absent. He continues to stay late at work in his capacity as a school teacher until Renai becomes overwhelmed managing the ghostly invasions alone. She contacts him at work and pleads for him to return home. When he finally arrives she interrogates and accuses him. “You’re never here . . . You’re not here with me in this situation. You’re just avoiding it.” Later that evening, Renai wakes from a nightmare in which a shadowy figure stalks her outside the French doors in her bedroom. The cinematography uses conventions such as close range telephoto imaging, black and white film stock, and echoing voices to highlight the Elm-Street-like nightmarish experience of the episode. As the figure invades her bedchamber, the dream fuses with reality, and Josh comes to her rescue. He agrees to abandon the house for safer climes and begins the narrative trajectory that displaces their parental negligence.

Saddled with the guilt formerly ascribed to their own parents (by Gill, the media, contemporary horror film), the nostalgic audience of Insidious was in dire need of a fantasy of displacement through which it could alleviate anxieties regarding its own negligent parenting. Slavoj Žižek’s description of “Fantasy as a support of reality” (Sublime 47) finds its most comprehensive articulation in his The Plague of Fantasies, a neo-Lacanian extension

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of psychoanalytical theory, which provides a particularly useful framework for the examination of how cinematic fantasy works to displace both repressed and explicit social anxieties. Žižek defines the psychological working of fantasy as a mechanism that maintains a distance between our perception of reality and the Real while creating that which is desired in a process of negotiating subjectivity (Plague 5-7). Fantasy works to provide comfort by obfuscating the horrors of a reality in which desires are in constant flux based on social intersubjectivity (Plague 9-11). The focus on supernatural killers from an ambiguous netherworld in many of the slasher films of the 70s and 80s (and in Insidious) was comforting on two levels: it exoticized family discord with a supernatural metaphor, distancing the viewer from such graphic reality as that present in recent torture pornography, and it displaced the perceived malevolence of parents to sexually troubled monsters.

The first of two repositories for the displacement of guilt regarding negligent parenting is Christian demonology. The demon holding Dalton’s mind captive and that is trying to enter his body is represented in the specifically Christian visual conventions of depictions of Satan. He has hair like horns, and Elise observes that “he has hooves for feet,” a “black body,” and a “blood-red face.” In “The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture,” Christopher Sharrett observes the tendency in the Hellraiser movies, “à la The Exorcist (1973), to make the devil carry the bag for a variety of political-economic phenomena” (Sharrett 263). Insidious does the same with social politics. The Satan-like demon is made to ‘carry the bag’ for the parents’ inability to understand the ills of their catatonic child.

However, in Insidious, the previous generation of parents are made even more monstrous than the Christian demons. Referring to many of the same earlier horror films Gill mentions, Carol Clover states that “[t]hese films do indeed seem to pit the child in a struggle, at once terrifying and attractive, with the parental Other, and it is a rare example that does not thematize parent-child relations” (100). Part of the nostalgia in Insidious reintroduces this struggle between the now parental Elm Street kids and their own parents. It is Josh’s mother, Lorraine, who first reports seeing the demon holding Dalton captive in her dream. In conversation with Lorraine, the same demon also suddenly appears behind Josh. Lorraine is coded as a catalyst that draws malevolent forces towards Josh. The entry of Josh’s mother into the narrative represents a sort of regression for him to a childhood state where he repeatedly defers to the authority of his mother and her clairvoyant friend Elise. Josh initially attempts to reject Elise’s dangerous re-introduction of his repressed astral projection. He speaks in a language that highlights rationality, usually held in opposition to the pre-repression pleasure principle (Freud Beyond 54). “How did the voice of reason become the bad guy here?” (Insidious). Nevertheless, Josh is compelled to re-enter the repressed netherworld of his childhood by his mother. Lorraine reveals to Josh a series of photos, repressed from his memory, in which a demon-hag advances ever-closer to
young Josh. Elise states that “suppressing your memory and your ability to astral project was the only way to stop her from getting into you.” The dialogue offers a cursory, almost dismissive phrase in which Lorraine makes clear her responsibility for neglecting Josh: “I’m sorry Josh.” In an analysis that identifies Insidious as participant with the films to which he refers, Gill concludes that “[t]he screams provoked by the anomalous monsters stalking these adolescents are a cry for help unheeded by parents” (20). Lorraine admits to Josh, “I dismissed your stories. I told you to grow up. And then I saw her for myself.” Elise takes some of the responsibility as well: “I didn’t want to make you remember all this. I do it for the sake of your son.” Lorraine and Elise convince Josh that Dalton has inherited his astral abilities from Josh, and that he must re-enter “The Further” to save his son. Convinced of his responsibility in Dalton’s plight, Josh agrees to follow Dalton into “The Further.”

Insidious goes one step further in its nostalgic project to relocate the responsibility of the horrors of negligent parents on the previous generation. Unlike the slasher films to which Gill refers, in which primarily male parents are negligent, Insidious identifies these parents, Josh’s parents, as exclusively female. Both Josh’s and Renai’s fathers are entirely absent from the narrative, not even endowed with a backstory to explain their absence. Monstrous mothers, however, abound. As the film opens, the first-person perspective of the camera wanders through young Josh’s house as he sleeps, no sign of parents anywhere, until the camera settles on a demonic hag loitering in the window with ambiguous designs against the sleeping child. Once Josh’s mother enters the narrative, the malevolence and most spectacular aspects of the horrific mise-en-scène accelerate substantially. The “monstrous-feminine” and the relationship of the male child to the phallic mother are articulated by Barbara Creed in predominantly psychoanalytical terms (Creed 35). “With the subject’s entry into the symbolic, which separates the child from the mother, the maternal figure and the authority she signifies are repressed” (44). When Josh defers to the authority of his mother and Elise, he enters a world of his own repressed unconscious in which the demonic matriarch he suppressed as a child is unleashed once again. The parental Other is decidedly female on three counts: Lorraine, Elise, and the demon-hag (although the demon-hag is performed by a male actor—an aspect of the narrative substantially highlighted in the sequel.) Before their intervention, Josh’s successful repression of the monstrous patriarchal mother was his own salvation. Unfortunately, his own mother initiates Josh’s recall of his pre-repressed state; her friend Elise, maternal to Josh in many regards, re-initiates him into its labyrinthine psychology; and the evil repressed mother within “The Further” finally possesses him. Josh has some serious mother issues.

The nightmarish dream-world of “The Further” is clearly Josh’s unconscious. The viewer is only given access to it through Josh and never through Dalton. It is a spectacular dream-world, similar to that of the Elm Street films, in which all manner of supernatural
entities maintain residence, a labyrinth of Josh’s nostalgic unconscious. Dalton becomes trapped in this realm where Josh’s repressed demons, re-introduced by his mother, run rampant. In “The Further” Josh is confronted with horrific foils for both his mother and himself. Both Josh and the Satan-like demon are “desperate to possess Dalton,” and the demon-hag, like Josh’s own mother, is just as desperate to possess Josh. In this regard, Insidious takes the misogyny present in the slasher cycles to new heights. Freddy Krueger is a demon in his own right. The Satan-like demon in Insidious and his somewhat less threatening ‘younger brother’ (the long-haired wraith) have a mother. The demon-hag is clearly the matriarch of the horrific netherworld. Her dominance disavows God’s paternity over the representation of Satan that holds Dalton captive allowing both the Christian and the bourgeois domestic father to remain unscathed by the film’s project of blame. Instead, the narrative focuses on the Oedipal invasion of the mother into the son’s successful repression of her authority and the concomitant annihilation it brings (Erens 359). Breaching his successful repression of the maternal Other unleashes the demons over which she presides, and Josh must once again confront the matriarchal demon-hag he had successfully repressed as a child.

Josh finally confronts her in a mirror, invoking Lacan’s “mirror stage” and what Christian Metz describes as “the mirror which alienates man in his own reflection and makes him the double of his double, the subterranean persistence of the exclusive relation to the mother” (4). The identification with a complete “imago” that Lacan suggests marks the first recognition of the individuality of the subject is represented, in this case, by the oppressive matriarchal feminine repressed within Josh’s unconscious (Lacan 256). The demon-hag is a horrible and repressed aberration of Josh’s mother’s patriarchal authority, given access to Josh via the mirror-stage mechanism within “The Further” of his unconscious. Unable to escape it in his conscious life, she is free to do so once he allows his consciousness to explore his unconscious. There repressed within “The Further” is his mother’s alter-ego, finally able to possess him entirely, keeping him trapped within, while she runs rampant.

This pivotal moment in the narrative plays with an immanence of the self-identificatory effects of the mirror stage in an unconscious space that allows for Freud’s return of the repressed. In the third section of Freud’s Moses and Monotheism, he offers a compelling description of the way in which the early repression of desires (and, by extension, the fears that emerge from them) that would cause displeasure will inevitably re-emerge in aberrant forms.³ Josh’s repression of matriarchal authority “renews its demand [to penetrate Josh’s conscious mind], and, since the path to normal satisfaction remains closed to it by what we may call the scar of repression, somewhere, at a weak spot, it opens another path for itself” (Freud, Moses 127). However, the repressed never enters “consciousness smoothly and unaltered” (Moses 95). The demon-hag’s final possession of Josh’s being brings horrific results, realized in the murder of
one of his corporeal matriarchs. The clairvoyant Elise, now a threat to the aberrant demon-hag’s authority over Josh in the real world, is promptly dispatched.

The closure of the film leaves the demon-hag at large, in Josh’s male body, a specific reference to the horrors of masculinized women now able to masquerade in male bodies and practice their malevolence by refusing the male child’s need to keep them repressed. By confronting his own evil foil, Josh rescues Dalton but leaves him a world where the unrepressed patriarchal mother, now possessing Josh, is unleashed. Josh’s negligence, now full-fledged malevolence, is not his own; it is the effect of his domination by a repressed representation of the matriarch. The monstrous-feminine has found a safe haven in the negligent father, and Josh’s responsibility is neatly displaced onto the previous generation of mothers (of which the narrative provides an excess of three, but not a single father). Renai is little more than a damsel in distress at the hands of Josh’s demons, assaulting her through their son. The promotional images for the movie suggest that there is an inherent evil to Dalton reminiscent of The Omen, but the narrative does not deliver on that false promise. Josh’s son Dalton is merely a susceptible portal for the demons of Josh’s unresolved matriarchal repression.

Insidious is a horror nostalgia film that longs for the conservative adolescent monsters of the 1970s and 1980s: parents, women, and nightmares. It works as a fantasy of displacement that revisits the themes introduced by Pat Gill in his analysis of negligent parents in A Nightmare on Elm Street; Insidious relieves the new generation of parents of the blame they placed on their own parents. Facing indictments in contemporary horror film and in the media, the children of the Elm Street generation, now parents themselves, were in need of such a fantasy. It is no coincidence that the remake of the original A Nightmare on Elm Street came out in 2010, the same year as Insidious. Both represent articulations of ‘the Freddy Krueger generation,’ nostalgic for its own neo-conservative worries, so much less troubling than the socially critical, and unsettlingly violent torture pornography in current vogue. Insidious is a horrific nostalgia film in which an aging ‘slasher’ generation attempts to reassert its horrific agenda of repressed fears regarding parental responsibility and displaces all responsibility onto the mothers of the generation previously blamed. The film’s most progressive moments are the vilification of Christianity, but this vilification is also displaced onto women. Insidious not only placates the parental anxieties of the generation to which it appeals, it specifically placates male anxieties and recodes their negligent parents as entirely feminine, salvaging both the current parental generation, and the patriarchal order of their responsibility for the terrors faced by their children in a single revisionist nostalgia. Insidious offers its audience a reassuring narrative through which to explain away contemporary parental negligence. It’s not our fault, kids; ask Freddy Krueger—it’s all Grandma’s fault.

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“Pop/Corn”
In “A Souvenir of Love,” Rey Chow observes that “cinematic image, because of its visible nature, becomes a wonderfully appropriate embodiment of nostalgia’s ambivalence between dream and reality, of nostalgia’s insistence on seeing “concrete” things in fantasy and memory” (Chow 64).

Carol Clover argues that while “Freud stressed the maternal source of the unheimlich, the Other of [slasher] films is decidedly androgynous” (Clover 100).

Works Cited


*Insidious*. Dir. James Wan. Film District, 2011. DVD.


“Pop/Corn”
