TRANSFORMING THE PREDATOR: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CHILD
SEXUAL ABUSER IN 21st CENTURY AMERICAN VISUAL MEDIA

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This thesis examines the ways American visual media – television and mainstream/independent cinema – has presented the narrative of child sexual abuse since the beginning of the 21st century. Due to the rise of the counterculture movement and the sexual revolution of the 1960s, a discourse for talking about child sexuality was created. By providing an opportunity to discuss children and sex, for the first time cultural products could deal overtly with child sexual abuse, rather than connotatively. In response to this new discourse, conservative ideals about child sexuality proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s that attempted to return the child to a world of purity and asexuality with all threats to this purity being monstrous. The examples discussed in this thesis highlight the ways that contemporary American visual media has responded to three decades of obsession that created a “master narrative” of child sexual abuse – something that continues to play a significant role in society.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: PEDOPHILIA PANIC
Child Sexual Abuse in America

It is not clear which had more of an effect on creating the moral panic of child sexual abuse that has filled American culture throughout the past three decades: the sexual revolution of the 1960s that created a discourse on child sexuality or the dominant ideology’s need to find a new sexual deviant to hang the erotic faults of society upon. Homosexuality had been considered a disease for decades and provided dominant ideology with a pariah to lambaste. However, gay and lesbian liberation of the 1960s and early 1970s forced the masses to recognize the community as human, rather than diseased aberrations of heteronormativity. An amalgamation of these and other cultural shifts seems to have created what sociologist Steven Angelides calls “a moral panic” about child sexual abuse and the child sexual abuser prevalent from the late 1970s into the late 1990s. For decades America fixated on the narrative and created a “media obsession with pedophilia” (Angelides, p. 97). While contemporary mainstream America still maintains this fixation to some extent, more novel outlets have been created that allow for diverse comments on the narrative of child sexual abuse. This thesis will examine the ways that 21st-century American visual media have responded to three decades of “moral panic.” These responses range from producing one-sided stories of debauchery that mirror the rudimentary and ubiquitous notion of the horrendous abuser; representations of the abuser as a flawed human continually wrestling with his immoral desires; and culminating in the portrayals of sexualized children who encourage the sexually-charged attention of would-be abusers.
This work will begin by examining mainstream American media that represents the pedophile as a monster much closer to the psychopath or slasher of mainstream horror than a human being. In Dateline NBC’s “To Catch a Predator” and Sin City (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005) the distinction between good and evil is clear, as heroic action is needed to defeat the superhuman molester. From here the thesis will move to more empathetic portrayals of pedophilia and child sexual abuse in semi-independent American cinema. In Little Children (Todd Field, 2006) and The Woodsman (Nicole Kassell, 2004) the child sexual abusers are no longer peripheral monsters. They become the focus of the film as the audience is asked to recognize the plight of the abuser. The thesis culminates with an examination of Birth (Jonathan Glazer, 2004) and Hard Candy (David Slade, 2005), two independent American films that focus on sexualized children that blur the border between abuser and victim. What these forms of contemporary media reassert is the ambiguity of child sexual abuse, as no label seems appropriate for the vast category. Rather, the current notion appears to be a social construction that changes from cultural product to cultural product and from decade to decade.

Theorizing Child Sexual Abuse

In The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I, Michel Foucault explains that the art of confession was employed long before the pathologies of sexuality were created and “Since the Middle Ages at least, Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth” (p. 58). As a result, a society of confessors and pathologies exists where every transgression has a source that can be spotted through confession. According to Foucault, these
confessions are what (continue to) create disparate sexualities that can be studied and controlled through cultural discourses. What followed were “specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex” that created the following ultimate truths: 1) female bodies were inherently and overtly sexual and therefore had to be controlled; 2) children were sexual beings from the moment of birth and therefore should be studied in order to control and quell their sexuality; 3) the only allowable sex was to be procreative; and 4) anything that did not follow the clear guidelines of (3) was a “perverse pleasure” and therefore needed to be pathologized and if feasible treated/cured (Foucault, pp. 104-105). Of these four, only children continue to lack their own sexual autonomy.

Foucault believes that prior to the modern figuration of the child as a pure and innocent being, Western societies were anxious about these “‘preliminary’ sexual beings, on the side of sex, yet within it, astride a dangerous dividing line” (p. 104). A child’s sexuality could not be controlled unless nursed through the various discourses to mold him/her into a controllable element of society: “Parents, families, educators, doctors, and eventually psychologists would have to take charge, in a continuous way, of this precious and perilous, dangerous and endangered sexual potential” (Foucault, p. 104). By the middle of the 18th century, aristocrats had learned that the best way to control the lower classes for political and economic gain was to pass the mores of the “conventional family” down from the top creating a “campaign for the ‘moralization of the poorer classes’” (Foucault, p. 122). Of course, this moralization had to start from the beginning by refusing to recognize the sexual desire of the proletarian child, like the child of nobility.
Sociologist Martin Killias explains that one of the first steps in controlling child sexuality was labeling adolescents as children. Adolescents had been considered young adults until the mid-1800s when aristocratic law established that “adolescents needed logically to be excluded from any sexual activity” (Killias, p. 468). Killias explains that the creation of the pure and innocent child was a conscious movement made by those with power during the 19th century:

Given the view that adolescents should prepare for adulthood instead of being involved in adult activities, they had from the nineteenth century on, to meet more and more rigid standards of ‘purity’ in sexual and other moral matters, such as drinking and smoking. These new standards of purity ironically developed at a time when puberty tended to occur at an increasingly young age (p. 468).

A sea change then occurred throughout many Western societies as institutionalized education began to play a larger role. Children no longer left school once they reached adolescence and the more adolescents were considered child-like, the more they “tended to be excluded from adult social roles” (Killias, p. 468). While the family had previously been the institution for establishing the rules of sexuality, the state-run education systems were now taking over (Killias, p. 468).

In *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*, Judith Levine explains that during the fin de siècle children were going into the mills and factories next to adults. Rather than the aristocracy policing child sexuality in order to keep family ties, industrial families began policing sexuality to keep children from “the adult world and its pleasures” (Levine, p. 30). The fear manifested mostly in respect to the young working women whose morals were far from what the economic elite and religious communities
deemed acceptable. Following the pleas of the “feminists and socioeconomic reformers,” the press began running stories on the new marketplace where “venal capitalism fornicated with sexual license” and “between 1886 and 1895, twenty-nine states raised their [age of consent] from as low as seven to as high as eighteen” (Levine, p. 30). A significant fulcrum to these new laws was the rise of “white slavery” scares as the media proliferated stories of “sexual salesmen…sinister by definition” who were pimping out wholesome, white, American women (Levine, p. 30). Interestingly, this gendering of the “swarthy Jews, Italians, and Greeks” appears to be a precursor to the gendering of the sexual pervert and pederast from the 1920s to the 1950s (Levine, p. 30). Of course, these are the same type of men that would become the male-only child sexual abusers highlighted throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in American media.

According to Levine’s work, as America shifted from the Great Depression to the Cold War and to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, there was continuous evolution in the country’s thoughts on child sexuality and child sexual abuse (pp. 31-32). The counter culture of the 1960s created a discourse that allowed Americans to talk about child sexuality rather than ignoring its existence. However, this movement was soon quelled when the Reagan administration and the Christian right joined forces and the same outright movement towards conservative morals resurfaced (Levine, p. 32). It was a move to abolish all of the strides made by the sexual revolution during the 1960s and 1970s and it included forcing gays and lesbians back into the closet, ignoring the AIDS crisis, and attempting to shut down the pornography business. Various laws were passed in the early 1980s and the 1985 Commission on Pornography “lent new legitimacy to the idea that pornography causes harm, especially to children” (Levine, p
The power of the Meese Commission (as it would later be called) is evident in our culture’s relationship with child sexuality in the last twenty-plus years. Levine explains that since these hearings the “notion has mushroomed, morphing into the suspicion that exposing children to any explicit sexual information can hurt them” and commenced the movement toward the overt suppression of child sexuality and sexual abuse/pedophilia panic that currently exists in America (p. 13).

The past centuries that Foucault, Killias, and Levine theorize about have created significant semantic confusion in regards to child sexual abuse. For example, what the pedophile has become in the United States is inherently linked to our understanding of child sexuality. Anyone who sexually desires someone who is not supposed to be remotely sexual is clearly in the wrong, possibly even diseased and while child sexual abuse and pedophilia do exist, society’s categorizations are puzzling: the pathology of someone who is 45, yet desires sexual contact with a child of 7 is much different from the condition of a 22 year old that falls for a 16 year old. However, both relationships are considered illegal (sexual abuse/statutory rape) and require both adults to register as sex offenders. The annual reports of sex crimes against children or sex offenders registered do not differentiate between the previously mentioned “offenses.” These misleading figures help to create the current moral panic and substantiate the epidemic created by our cultural products, especially in American media.

In 1886, Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing coined the term “pedophilia” in *Psychopathia Sexualis* as “a draw towards children not in consequence of degenerated morality or physical impotence, but rather by morbid disposition”; the American Psychiatric Association adopted a similar definition during the mid-20th
century and brought it into American discourse (Krafft-Ebing, p. 555). Prior to this, the
“sex psychopaths” of the time were lumped into one large category as “perverts” rather
than being split into variable areas such as “homosexuals” and “pederasts” (Jenkins, p
27). Interestingly, in contemporary American media the term “pedophile” has come to refer to any adult engaging in sexual activity with a minor (of any age) and rarely is consent taken into account (i.e. the adult in statutory rape cases is often referred to as a “pedophile”). One recent example of this inconsistency occurred in a recent news story on CNN Headline News in which anchor Mike Galanos refers to a group of teenagers caught “sexting” each other as “pedophiles” even though all parties were consenting and there was no generational gap (Galanos, “Teen Charged”). Such a story highlights the ambiguity of the term since its introduction into the American lexicon and shows the complexities of child sexual abuse as a whole.

In his book Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting, James Kincaid argues that the “myth of child molestation” has become an inherent part of American culture. According to Kincaid, “We are never outside of these stories but always live within them, not just telling the tale but playing our parts in it” (p. 5). Society is continually attempting to solve the problem of child sexual abuse as the media covers sensational stories to inform the public. At the same time, it fans the flames in hopes that these stories never cease, keeping the subject of child molestation continually in the middle of cultural discourse “so we can disown it while welcoming it in the back door” (Kincaid, p. 6). Kincaid believes the myth of child molestation belongs to the Gothic tradition, as such a narrative allows for heinous punishment to quell the threat.

1 “Sexting” refers to sexually explicit picture messages sent from one cell phone to another. It is a combination of the words “sex” and “texting.”
Like the Gothic monster that is bound to return, the narrative of child molestation never truly comes to an end. The “molested” turn into “molesters” and the cycle continues producing infinite numbers of child sexual abusers (Kincaid, pp. 11-12).

Kincaid argues that society has constructed a child that is innocent and pure, but that is also the target of American culture’s collective eroticism, thus producing an overtly sexualized vision of children “while denying doing any such thing” (p. 13). He explains:

We may be skeptical of the therapy industry and its ability to manufacture so easily people with recovered memories of childhood molestation; we may regard the attacks on the clergy with suspicion; we may think many of the day-care center trials are witch hunts […] but one thing remains indubitable, and we are all taught to know and believe it: adults by the millions find children so enticing that they will risk anything to have sex with them (pp. 13-14).

Kincaid is referencing the notion that Americans often doubt recovered memories, public attacks, etc., but in the end fail to question the notion of a universal attraction towards children. According to Kincaid, it has come to the point where the myth has consumed American culture.

Jason Lee’s analysis on Euro-American “media/culture” in his book *Pervasive Perversions: Paedophilia and Child Sexual Abuse in Media/Culture* highlights how society has turned child sexual abuse into a commodity. “The child must remain untainted” in order to become an adult that is able to reproduce and continue the cycle and success of the dominant ideology (Lee, p. 14). When a child is molested, that commodity loses its future value; purity is gone and the child becomes a victim that
briefly provides the visualization needed by the media to prove the narrative and continue the cycle. Lee uses the story of Michael Jackson to explain his theory. The supposed victims of Jackson became the “poster children” for reproducing the image of abuse. In a sense, the commodity/product became the means of production/machine (Lee, p. 209-210). However, once the victim has been used, they lose value as both commodity and machine and are replaced by a new victimized child.

According to Lee, the monstrous pedophile is demonized because he has tainted the value of the commodity and corrupted the “cultural and historical evidence enclosed within the child’s body and mind [that] could be retrieved” (p. 14). Euro-American media/cultures turns those who upset the cycle of capitalism into something other than human and inherently evil (Lee, p. 15). For example, in his analysis of *Natural Born Killers* (1994), Lee explains that “the child is an object, a commodity to be ‘had’ by the young, or increasingly old, to bring personal and social meaning and value” (Lee, p. 126). However, when the child, Mallory Knox (Juliette Lewis) is tainted in this film by an incestuous relationship with her father, Ed Wilson (Rodney Dangerfield) all value is lost. This inevitably leads to her sinister escapades with Mickey (Woody Harrelson) as molestation overturns the cultural narrative and becomes the source of Mallory’s neuroses. Similar portrayals of pedophilia as a source of female hysteria remain a constant in American film and television.

A Brief History of Child Sexual Abuse in American Media

As Foucault and Levine explain in their work referenced previously, the anxiety caused by child sexuality and the concept of child sexual abuse is not something attributed solely to the post-Stonewall 1970s of the United States. According to Philip
Jenkins in his history *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* this was simply the time when the term “acquired its present cultural and ideological significance, with its “connotations of betrayal of trust, hidden trauma, and denial” (p. xi). For decades, society had used terms like “pervert” and “predator” to label many forms of non-heteronormative sex. However, after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, homosexuals rightly spurned these labels and the “pedophile or molester” became the sole target of dominant ideology and the ultimate “sex psychopath” (Jenkins, pp. xi-xii).

Around the turn of the century all forms of sodomy –prior to late 19th century law, this included any penetrative sex between two men, bestiality, or “with a prepubescent child of either sex”– were punishable by law (including the death penalty) and records did not differentiate between acts (Jenkins, p. 22). Like Levine, Jenkins highlights the proliferation of age of consent laws during the early 20th century as embryonic action that helped to create the current concept of child sexual abuse. At this time “Progressives and muckrakers” produced evidence of “pervert danger” in the “underworlds of American cities” (Jenkins, p. 27). Newspapers, novels, and other forms of “literary muckraking” began covering stories of “gay and pederastic subcultures” that were claiming the innocence of children throughout the country. Interestingly, the majority of intergenerational sex covered by the media appeared to be consensual (therefore, not punishable as “rape”), but because of the newly instituted age of consent laws they were considered immoral and referred to as “statutory rape” (Jenkins, pp. 24 and 27).
According to Jenkins, it was this media coverage of “child rapists,” murders, etc. that coupled with modern medicine’s pathologizing of sex perversions to create the “age of the sex psychopath” during the mid 20th century:

Fears of criminal (though nonsexual) threats to children were aroused by the kidnapping wave that peaked with the Lindberg case of 1932. Between 1934 and 1936, when Bruno Hauptman was arrested, convicted, and executed for the kidnapping and murder of the Lindberg baby, the story often shared front pages with account of Fish [a man convicted of murdering and cannibalizing a 12-year-old boy]: Hauptmann’s execution followed Fish’s by three months. The juxtaposition may have encouraged readers to see the generalized danger to children in explicitly sexual terms (Jenkins, p. 50).

By the late 1940s the “sex crime menace” was a regular topic in Time, Newsweek, and other magazines, as child molestation was a natural transgression for the “sex hoodlum” who had previously only been associated with murder, rape, and indecent exposure (Jenkins, p. 53).

In the decades leading up to the mid-1950s, sexual perversion included all forms of transgressive behavior and therefore media coverage did not single out child molestation. In the years after the Korean War this began to change:

Although the end of the war in 1953 restored a more normal gender balance to American society, it was also around this time that the baby boom was peaking, and the emphasis of sexual fears decisively focused on the danger to children. Precisely then, the phrase ‘child molesting’ became nearly synonymous with sex crime in media usage (Jenkins, p. 72).
The term “child molesting” first appeared in an article in a 1953 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Similar coverage throughout American media forced lawmakers and law enforcement to crack down on sex crimes and created a cyclical effect as new laws and more arrests “kept the sex crime story firmly in the headlines” (Jenkins, p. 55). As legislation was passed to punish “sex psychopaths,” lawyers soon realized there were significant amounts of money to be made in the “politically profitable” cases on child molestation (p. 73).

*Boys Beware* (1961) was released to warn teenage males of the danger inherent in homosexuality and equated homosexual men with child molesters. As mentioned, previously all perversions were linked into one grand category, but by the 1950s and 1960s the dominant ideology was making a conscious attempt to link homosexuality with child sexual abuse. This creation of sexual abusers as only male is something that continued throughout the 1970s and even into contemporary representations of child sexual abuse. In all of the media examined in this thesis, the abuser is male with the one exception being *Birth*. However, as will be highlighted in the respective chapter, it is feasible that the male child may be implicated in the abuse as much as the female adult. It would then seem that the myth of predatory homosexual males that proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s—as well as the gendered threat of foreigners to white, American women during “white slavery” that Judith Levine describes—has been transposed onto the modern narrative of child sexual abuse. Whether monstrous, empathetic, or victimized, the child sexual abuser tends to be male.

The rise of the counterculture during the 1960s forced society to recognize child sexuality. This manifested progressively in popular music at the time. The Rolling
Stones released “Stray Cat Blues” on their *Beggar’s Banquet* (1968) album, a song featuring consenting sex between a grown man and two (very) underage girls. Blind Faith soon followed with their self-titled album, *Blind Faith* (1969) that featured a topless minor on its cover. This form of sexual expression differed from the popular music coming only years before. The songs of Chuck Berry – about riding around in cars while trying to unbuckle seatbelts – and Elvis could only connote sexually active teenagers. After the rise of sexual awareness in the late 1960s rockers were able to be more blatant about child sexuality.

After the Production Code was abolished in Hollywood, American cinema was afforded this same luxury. For the most part, the news media had always been able to cover stories of child sexuality – even if they were one-sided with the child always being asexual and passive – and cinema was left to connotation. By the end the 1960s Hollywood shed the metaphors and began to produce films such as *Alice’s Restaurant* (1969) that clearly presented sexually active minors. Not surprisingly, these progressive treatments of children and sex were soon met by reactionary coverage of child sexuality that filled the news and eventually took over mainstream cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. *Chinatown* (1974) is a notable example of this reactionary cinema. While it does not deal extensively with child sexual abuse, the topic is raised towards the end of the film when Gittes (Jack Nicholson) discovers his love, Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway)
was abused by her father, Noah Cross (John Huston) as a girl and is raising their illegitimate child. The abuse—and the overall notion of a sexually active child—becomes the clear cause of Evelyn’s neuroses. Prior to the abolition of the Production Code it could only be hinted that dabbling in sex as children caused problems later in life. After the social changes of the 1960s it was possible to overtly tie the two together.

This reactionary media was occurring as second-wave feminists and social workers were completing works that eventually lead to a fragmentation of the “sex crime” category. The media began to separate abuse against women—such as sexual assault and rape—from forms of child abuse. According to Jenkins:

Initially, neither issue was necessarily connected to the theme of molestation, but within a few years, concerns over sexual exploitation and domestic maltreatment combined to create a perception that all American children were sexually at risk […] and a cascade of works about abuse, incest, and sexual exploitation reached flood proportions (p. 118).

In a way, the media’s coverage “harkened back to the midcentury panic,” but with the ambiguous sexual pervert becoming a clearly defined “predatory molester” (Jenkins, p.119).

Magazines from Redbook to US News & World Report, as well as television news magazines such as 60 Minutes were running pieces on child sexual abuse. Time even did a piece on the proliferation of child “snuff” films, but like all forms of this violent and deadly pornography, no proof ever manifested and “snuff” films remain an urban legend (Jenkins, 122). However, unlike the media coverage that will be discussed in the next section, in print and visual media of the late 1970s, 1980s, and most of the 1990s
the monstrous pedophile tended to remain in the shadows with the focus lying more with the ominous threat of abuse and coverage of the victims. As a result, government-promoted institutions like The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) now serve as a modern day HUAC (the House Un-American Activities Committee). Similar to the latter, the NCMEC focuses on unearthing hidden deviants, but rather than flushing out closeted homosexuals and/or communists, they look for hidden pedophiles (Jenkins, 128-129). To this day the NCMEC remains the major institution for tracking sex offenders, searching for kidnapped children, and cracking down on child exploitation.

Jenkins refers to what followed the movement of initial reactionary media and work by 2nd-wave feminists/social workers as “A Cycle of Panic.” In this cycle “claims about danger are rather like commodities in a competitive marketplace [with] their success in gaining market share depending on the composition and tastes of the consumers” (p. 216). America flocked to stories of child molestation and the media continued to slake society’s thirst. The rise of “recovered memory” and molestation filled American media throughout the next two decades and according to Jenkins, “by 1991, sexual violence was at the forefront of American gender politics” (p. 182). This included numerous stories in The New York Times, articles in Cosmopolitan, and more coverage by 60 Minutes and Primetime Live. In made-for-TV movies like I Know My First Name is Steven (1989) the abuse and its effects were central. The topic of molestation and recovered memory was nowhere more prevalent than on TV talk shows. Oprah continually focused on her own story of molestation and stars such as Rosanne Barr were booked to tell their stories in front of live audiences and daytime television
watchers (Jenkins, p. 182-183). Perhaps the most interesting thing about all of this coverage is that the abuser remained the secondary element to the story; it was primarily about the victim and the neuroses caused by the abuse.

After “recovered memory” lost its commercial viability, the media quickly turned to the Catholic Church and throughout the mid-to-late 1990s stories of child sexual abuse by priests saturated the American media. TV movies like *The Boys of St. Vincent* (1992) and novels such as Andrew Greely’s *Fall from Grace* (1993) were telling the story of molestation within the Church. What marks this trend as different from those that came before is that this new tale of child sexual abuse made the abuser visible. The priest in question is always an active part of the narrative. However, while the molester is no longer in the shadows, in media coverage of the Catholic Church sex scandals the priests are often passed over and the Catholic institution becomes the larger target of blame. *Twist of Faith* (2004) and *Deliver Us from Evil* (2006) are documentaries that follow their main character(s) as they fight their way to the top only to find that the battle is hopelessly lost; the system of Catholic Church is the real monster.

In the chapters that follow, this thesis examines the cultural discourses that fed the child sexual abuse panic over the last thirty years and the recent portrayals of child sexual abuse where the focus shifts from the victim/abuse to the abuser. In these examinations it would appear that American media is entering a new era of what Jenkins calls a “child sexual abuse revolution.” These cultural products choose to cover the topic in different ways as a response to the previous decades of reactionary visual media.
Forms of Contemporary Representation

Chapter 2 examines contemporary mainstream American media that differs from previous media coverage of child sexual abuse only in that the pedophile is taken from the shadows and placed at the center of the narrative. Using Robin Wood’s and Susan Sontag’s works on the horror film and Jason Lee’s writing on the pedophile in “media/culture,” I show how Dateline NBC’s “To Catch a Predator” (2005-2007) and the feature film, Sin City (2005) combine the thematic techniques of the horror genre and past coverage of the pedophile in media to create representations of child sexual abuse that are narrowly different from the mainstream media of previous decades.

Chapter 3 focuses on two independent films that had some mainstream appeal. Little Children (2006) and The Woodsman (2004) frame the pedophile or child sexual abuser as human, rather than supernatural or monstrous caricatures. Using the work of Harris Mirkin, I argue that the men in these films represent a shift in the dominant ideology as the former sexual deviant is given a voice and becomes central to the narrative not as a threat, but as an empathetic character.

Chapter 4 examines Birth (2004) and Hard Candy (2005), two independent films that lacked the mainstream appeal of Little Children and The Woodsman because they do not frame children as the innocent and pure –the way dominant ideology believes them to be. These films complicate society’s myth of sexual abuse, as the “abused” children possess the same sexual agency previously given to their abusers. As a result, the minors in both of these films are not asexual, but are capable of using their eroticism to summon “abuse” rather than being unwillingly victimized by it.
In conclusion, this thesis maps the next shift in American visual media as it attempts to frame child sexuality and child sexual abuse. Recent independent films have attempted to tone down the severity of films like *Hard Candy* and construct more plausible narratives of intergenerational sex. However, the independent features that tend to question the victim/abuser relationship also remain out of reach for the majority of America. Films like *Eban and Charlie* (2000) and its often-foreign counterparts go straight to DVD, as their complication of adult and child sexual relations is often uncomfortable for the mainstream. Semi-independent films that reach wider audiences and receive significant press during award season continue to complicate the notion of child sexual abuse. However, these films tend to leave opinions on child molestation to the audience, rather than clearly commenting on the subject. This sector of independent cinema must remain closer to the side of the dominant ideology to ensure financial success.

Mainstream American media has also begun to question society’s construction of child sexual abuse. Recently, *20/20*—ABC’s weekly news magazine—aired a story on statutory rapes cases around the nation and the hypocrisy of some of these cases as they were ruining the lives of those involved rather than protecting the minors. *Rolling Stone* recently covered the story of a New Jersey boy who had slept with his high school gym teacher. The story focused on the fact that the gym teacher was never imprisoned because she was a woman, and also on the derision the boy faced for speaking out against what is considered to be every boy’s fantasy.

It appears that America is still in the middle of a “moral panic” about child molestation. Some reformist steps have been made, but for the most part the pedophile
remains a social pariah and the line of demarcation between victim and abuser continues to be clearly drawn. Semantically, the term “pedophile” remains a flawed term as it automatically connotes sinister acts by monstrous adults on unwilling minors even if the minor is barely a minor, knowingly and willingly acting out with sexual agency. The only plausible action to counter this panic is to clarify the definition of child sexual abuse and acknowledge that one label does not justifiably work for all. By seeing that the current notions of “child molestation” or “child sexual abuser” or “sexual predator” are social constructions it is possible to differentiate between those that deserve ostracism and those that do not.
CHAPTER 2
DESTROYING THE MONSTER

The Monstrous Pedophile in 21st Century Media Portrayals of Child Sexual Abuse

As outlined in the introduction, there are various modes for telling the master narrative of child sexual abuse. These stories range from the monstrous sexual abuser to the narrative of nebulous child sexuality and ambivalent adult offenders. This chapter focuses primarily on American visual media that has mirrored the horror genre in its treatment of the pedophile. While serving as the monsters in these comparably horrific narratives, the child molester can only be destroyed a) when members of the threatened or victimized community come together; or b) if the hero attains the superhuman qualities of the predator without actually becoming the abuser. While the media analyzed in later chapters tends to be more reformative in their treatment of the topic of child sexual abuse, adding ambivalence to the portrayals of the abusers, Dateline NBC’s “To Catch a Predator” (2005-2007) and Sin City (2005) mirror the horror film because like the monsters of horror, their pedophiles are framed as superhuman, pitting a recognizable good against a recognizable evil.

Through its continual evolution, from Frankenstein (1931) to Saw V (2008), the American horror film has been an allegory for the anxieties of society. Watching these films is often a cathartic experience as audiences are able to engage as the threat from the outside is crushed and society is returned to normalcy. The physical make-up of the threat and the means to its annihilation have changed over time, but the dichotomy between what American culture considers evil versus what is thought to be moral has always been the main theme of the horror genre.
According to Robin Wood’s chapter on the horror film in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, since the genre’s early years it has been used as an apparatus for demonizing repressed/oppressed sexualities that counter the domination of “monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists” (p. 71). This includes overt sexual energy (even if heterosexual), bisexuality/homosexuality, female sexuality, and child sexuality. In the horror film, these deviant sexualities appear “in the figure of the monster” and the genre serves as a mirror for the dominant ideology:

One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its emergence is dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression (Wood, p. 75).

Count Dracula and his overt sexual energy are staked in *Dracula* (1931). The homoerotic sadomasochism of Poelzig and Werdegast is repressed in *The Black Cat* (1934). Irene and her sexuality are destroyed as the panther mauls her during the climax of *Cat People* (1942). If these films are “our collective nightmares” about the destruction of heteronormativity, audiences always awake from the nightmare to see that the monster has been destroyed (Wood, p. 78).

Decades before Wood’s book, cultural theorist Susan Sontag published the essay “The Imagination of Disaster” as an analysis of plot in horror/science-fiction films. Sontag focuses mainly on the sci-fi films of the 1950s, but many of her arguments apply to the “monster films” that precede the 1950s sci-fi films as she references *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), and *King Kong* (1933). Sontag breaks down the
plot points that occur during the invasion films of the 1950s and early 1960s. Movies like *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) evolve through a specific set of elements, including: 1) the main character discovers something strange occurring around him/her; 2) after investigation, s/he discovers the threat and its source; 3) “The advice of anyone else who is consulted proves useless” and the destruction continues; and finally 4) “either the hero prepares to do battle alone” by discovering “the thing’s most vulnerable point” and annihilating it; or a collection of forces “deploy a complex technology which finally prevails against the invaders” (p. 43).

The former situation manifests in *Dracula*, as Professor Van Helsing becomes the lone hero who goes against the suggestions of those around him to destroy the monster. As an alternate to this narrative, Sontag references the work of Dr. Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* who attempts to play God and creates an uncontrollable monster that is only destroyed when the community joins forces (p. 43-45).

Jason Lee continues Sontag’s notion of man-made monsters that turn on their creators. According to Lee, this same process has occurred in the narrative of child sexual abuse/abusers in what he calls “media/culture” where the publicity surrounding the threat posed by the pedophile is meant for good, but has turned into sensationalism. Child sexual predators do exist, but rather than representing them as simply mentally unstable or flawed, the various outlets of media have turned them into superhuman monsters. According to Lee:

> We see this most explicitly in the reporting of Internet child sexual abuse crime, where the abusers are apparently always one step ahead of the police, as if they
are a more advanced species, inhumanly akin with machines … their evil making them more cunning and more able to avoid the law (p. 146).

Often these men are not shown, adding a mysterious quality to their existence and as Lee explains, creating “the ultimate enigma” (p. 173). Like all other cultural beings that cannot be controlled, the child sexual abuser is thrust into the limelight, creating a battle between good and bad that creates a “theatre of paedophilia” and “a melodrama of monsters and innocents” (p. 167). Similar to the “invisible” homosexuals and communists of the 1950s, the modern pedophile is now a member of the community, but cannot be identified.

Similar to Sontag’s recognition of how the monster can be destroyed in the horror/science-fiction film, Lee points out that the pedophile in contemporary media myth can be destroyed through transgressive acts of one hero or via the actions of the community. The “paedophile hunter” is only able to destroy the pedophile by “taking on the same powers” and subsequently hunting him down (Lee, p. 145). According to Lee this involves many things, such as “police [who break] the law” in order to track down the “supernaturally intelligent paedophile [who is] always one step ahead” (p. 155). Although the pursuer must break the law, in this myth his illegality is never as horrific as the pedophile’s; rather, it is something that must be done for the greater good. In terms of a community-led destruction of the pedophile, Lee’s explanation noticeably mirrors the Frankenstein story:

What is telling is that communities appear to only wish to see themselves as communities when undesirables want to enter their community, a theme that runs through many debates concerning asylum seekers and other “others” (p. 193).
Sontag’s and Lee’s monsters are outsiders that threaten the heteronormativity of Western society and their removal serves as a cathartic experience. However, while Sontag’s monsters are always present, Lee’s child sexual abusers remain in the shadows where they are unidentifiable and continue to strike fear as “the unstoppable evil escaping encapsulating the boundaries of surveillance” (Lee, p. 226). In combining these arguments, contemporary representations of child sexual abuse pull the abuser from the shadows. Like the horror monster, by drawing the monstrous abuser into the light, he is made the focus and the hero or community is able to go about destroying the threat and returning to normalcy.

Visual Media and the Monstrous Abuser

By the turn of the 20th century sexuality began to be categorized in medical and psychological terms. Certain transgressions from heteronormativity, such as “homosexuality” and “pederasty” were given names they had previously lacked. This was followed by media assaults on non-heteronormative sexualities and stories that covered the sordid underbelly of society. In many ways, this early news coverage created the nascent versions of the monstrous child molester that would resurface years later. World War I diverted the media’s attention from pedophiles and the decades that followed created a culture of libertines that lasted until the 1930s. While medicine and psychology were attending to disparate “perverse sexual practices” and returning the child sexual abuser to a medically deficient individual (rather than a creature of the shadows), the media took less interest in covering sexual transgressors. It was during this time that Fritz Lang’s M (1931) was released in Germany as a comment on the debauchery of that country’s post World War I years. The film creates a criminal
hierarchy of sorts as it focuses on a band of lawbreakers who take it upon themselves to catch child murderer Hans Beckett (Peter Lorre). Once they have captured Beckett at the end of the film, he makes it clear that his murders (and connoted molestation) are something he cannot control. Beckett is a product of a German culture that began to lose its grip on morality and much like the monsters of many horror films it is only through a community of lawbreakers (whose illegal activity never descends to Beckett’s heinous level) that he is caught.

At this time in the United States, American news media was producing a slew of sordid tales and according to Philip Jenkins, “well-publicized multiple-murder cases contributed to shaping the public image of the sex criminal as a violent predator” (p. 50). However, these stories appeared to sell papers and were often more palatable because they lacked visual aids. This was still an era when American society lacked a discourse to talk about child sexual abuse on any level. As was referenced in the introduction, these sex crimes were grouped into one large category of “sexual perversion.” When American film wanted to comment on the rise of this new threat, it could only do so through connotation.

Mirroring the visual tone of Lang’s M and other German Expressionist films of the previous decade, Universal Pictures released Frankenstein and Dracula in 1931. Like other genre films –such as the Western– these films were able to comment on American culture in nuanced ways that often went over the heads of conservative groups and censors. However, while Dracula deals primarily with the Count attacking/raping adults, Frankenstein embodies the generic trend towards connotation of child sexual abuse (perhaps entirely accidentally).
In the film, after Dr. Frankenstein’s monster escapes his master and roams around the outskirts of the village, he finds Little Marie throwing flowers into a pond. The original version of the film had the monster picking Marie up and throwing her into the pond thinking she would float rather than drown. However, the scene was censored and instead a cut is made as the monster is reaching for the young child. What results is connoted molestation rather than murder—the former tending to be far worse according to the dominant ideology. Interestingly, according to Harry Benshoff’s work on the horror genre, when the film was re-released years later, “amidst a media flurry of ‘sex crime’ stories,” this scene was emphasized in the trailer to the film (p. 142). The monster and Maria are shown “walking hand-in-hand while the narration described ‘a monster turned loose… to prey upon the innocence of children’” (Benshoff, p. 142). Though moments like these were rare in American film until the 1960s provided a discourse for commenting on child sexuality and abuse, for decades the horror genre was able to provide rare (connoted) manifestations of the child sexual abuse narrative in ways the news media could not.

The success of Dracula and Frankenstein led to a cultural obsession with the monster film that lasted until the early 1950s serving as escapist cinema during World War II and the Korean War (Jenkins, p. 52). It was during this time that Hollywood thoroughly enforced the Production Code and “made it impossible to deal overtly with perverts, rapists, or child molesters” (Jenkins, p. 56). As a result, the industry used the

![image](https://example.com/image.png)

**Figure 2:** This shot of the monster throwing young Marie into the water was cut and a more sexually suggestive shot was used instead.
horror film to connote the monstrosity of non-heteronormative sexualities. As previously mentioned, the monster-child scene in *Frankenstein* was quite the rarity considering that most of the horror films during the 1930s and 1940s tended to focus on connoting the horrors of homosexuality. However, by the beginning of the 1950s America had once again returned to the threat of child sexual abuse and the sci-fi horror film was once again the outlet for relieving society’s anxieties.

*Them!* (1954) is an example of how the newly minted sci-fi horror genre dealt with the threat of child sexual abuse. The film opens as two police officers find a young girl abandoned in the middle of the New Mexico desert. The look on her face is clearly one of shock and it is unclear until late what has happened to her. This ambiguity allows the audience to interpret different sources of her shock and considering the rise of molestation stories filling the news during this era, it is quite possible to believe many read the girl’s face as a reaction to molestation. As more people are found dead, it is revealed that giant ants created by governmental nuclear testing (and not child molesters) are causing the destruction. The remainder of the film follows various law enforcement agencies, military cadres, and scientific groups hunting down the queen ants before they can lay their eggs and proliferate more destruction. However, child molestation is connoted again at the end of the film. The giant ants have taken two prepubescent boys as their “slaves” and the group must not only destroy the ants, but also save the boys in order for the mission to be successful. With contemporary knowledge of child molestation it seems clear that the filmmakers were connoting molestation since the majority of sci-fi horror films tended to focus on adult victims and leave children out of the diegesis.
In the later 1950s there was a spate of films that Benshoff refers to as “teenage monster movies” in his book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. According to Benshoff, films such as *I Am a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) and *How to Make a Monster* (1959) were generic vehicles for presenting the same message (although metaphorically) as *Boys Beware*, the homosexual-as-predator film mentioned in the introduction. The point of these films was to warn teenagers against the threat of homosexuality. These films—as well as more dramatic productions such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)—presented the “idea that ‘normal’ young men would only turn into ‘true’ homosexuals if older ‘true’ homosexuals continued to lead them astray” (Benshoff, p. 139). Whereas previous media lumped all sexual deviants into one large category, 1950s American media was consciously connecting homosexuality to child sexual abuse. As Benshoff explains, “This homosexual-as-seductive-pederasty idea was becoming increasingly prevalent during the post-war period” (p.139).

The rise of the sexual revolution during the 1960s comingled with the eradication of the Production Code in 1966 and provided American horror cinema with a discourse to denotatively comment on child sexuality. Previously, the news media was able to cover these stories, but never took into account the possible sexual agency of the minors involved. Such treatment has tended to continue throughout the last 40 years in the news media, but mainstream and independent cinema have been able to be rather progressive in their comments on child sexuality and child sexual abuse. For horror film this appears to have surfaced in the 1970s beginning as reactionary cinema embodying the cultural anxieties that arose about newly recognized child sexuality. One is immediately drawn to films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976) that not
only reinforce the power of religion, but also reaffirm the fears of sexual children. One example of this comes from *The Exorcist* as young Regan (Linda Blair) masturbates with the cross in front of Father Karras (Jason Miller). Child masturbation is inherently wrong by the standards of the American ideology, but showing the child possessed by the devil and desecrating Catholicism only amplified the horror.

When horror films returned to magnify the monster in the mid-1970s—rather than focusing on “possessed” children—the situation was much different than the man-made monsters, vampires, and aliens of classical Hollywood. These new beasts were products of dysfunctional families and an American ideology that shoved them to the periphery. As a result, when psychopaths like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*’s (1974) Leatherface and zombies from *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) attack, audiences often see these monsters as products of the American family/ideology. Also, because of the sexual revolution and the abolition of the Production Code, these films did not have to connote their harm towards minors—*Halloween*’s (1978) Michael Myers is clearly slashing sexually active teenagers. If the few progressive films that come from this era in the late 1970s were trying to produce empathy for their monsters who were killing minors then it is possible to see a corollary between them and the films discussed in Chapter 3 that provide empathetic portrayals of the child sexual abuser. In both cases the audience is not asked to identify with the monster—especially in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* which lacks the POV of the monster that *Halloween* and later films provide—but is asked to see them as products of a flawed patriarchal system.

Following these films American horror returned to minor-attacking monsters that were undoubtedly evil. A case could be made that *Halloween*’s Michael Myers started
this reactionary shift since he is killing innocent teenagers apparently because they are sexually active. However, Michael is also a product of a dysfunctional family like his previous psychopathic brethren, namely Psycho’s (1960) Norman Bates and aforementioned Leatherface. On the other hand, the successors to Michael are clearly evil beasts that have no family to blame for their sinister actions. Jason Voorhees of Friday the 13th (1980) and its sequels, as well as Freddy Krueger of Nightmare on Elm Street (1984) and its sequels appear to kill/mutilate/rape sexually active teenagers out of spite. These films tend to be rebuttals to the child sexuality revolution of the 1960s in that kids are getting killed for having sex, but they also reaffirm the ideology of the “child abuse revolution” of the past three decades that Philip Jenkins examines. With the new discourse on child sexuality these horror films are able to be more blatant in their treatment of all aspects of children and sex not allotted in classical horror cinema. Unfortunately, rather than making progressive comments they tend to reaffirm the media’s sensationalism of child sexual abuse that has been occurring since the beginning of the 20th century.

In relation to child sexual abuse, the horror genre has not made many changes since the early 1980s. Amid the numerous sequels to Halloween, Friday the 13th, and Nightmare on Elm Street there have been recent films such Eli Roth’s Cabin Fever (2002) and Hostel (2005), and the Rob Zombie films House of 1000 Corpses (2003), The Devil’s Rejects (2005), and a remake of Halloween (2007) that continue to punish minors for being sexually active. For the most part, the monsters in these films are inherently evil and lack any form of empathy.
Outside of the horror genre, the current media trend in covering child sexual abuse is a hybridization of reactionary horror films, both old and new, and the popular narrative of Jenkins’ “child abuse revolution.” Molestation is no longer part of the periphery or back-story, but becomes the central element to plot advancement with the abuser placed center stage and ceasing to be a shadowy figure. The abuser in this media takes the place of the monster of the horror film and is clearly identifiable. Rather than abducting and murdering innocent civilians, the pedophilic monster poses a clear threat to the innocence of children not because he wishes to kill, but because he wishes to rape. *Dateline NBC*’s “To Catch a Predator” embodies the idea of a sophisticated and technologically savvy community that coalesces to draw out and catch the shadowy pedophile. It takes law enforcement, Internet technology, and unlawful activity to stop these superhuman predators. *Sin City* creates the same superhuman predator, but rather than a whole community, one man must go against the law to save the innocence of a child. These two samples of contemporary American media embody the shift where telling the story of the pedophile no longer means keeping his face out of view, but where –just as the monsters of horror films– he becomes the central focus of the narrative.

**What it takes “To Catch a Predator”**

The “To Catch a Predator” series first aired in November 2004 as a one-shot segment entitled “Dangerous Web.” The segment involved NBC producers working with Perverted Justice, an Internet watchdog group that specializes in “targeting adults cruising the Internet to solicit sex from minors” (McCollam, p. 28). Perverted Justice volunteers, posing as willing minors, set up meetings via online chats with solicitors who...
would arrive at a specific location, usually a home rented by NBC. When the Internet predator entered the home there was no minor, only Chris Hansen, host of the show, who would then corner the man and ask him a series of questions. If the predator decided to run, police were set up outside the home and he was arrested. Oftentimes the man would attempt to explain himself before Hansen would call in the SWAT team (literally) who would then take the man away. Cameras were always present during these scenes in order to show the significant amount of technology and manpower it took to capture these predators and resembling the culminating scenes of horror films as police and military are called upon to kill the monster that is “wreaking havoc” and “making a mess” of quiet American cities (Sontag, p. 44). Because of the enormous success of the initial segment, Dateline NBC decided to bring the segment back during sweeps week the next fall under the name “To Catch a Predator” (McCollam, p. 30).

Creating part of the monstrous persona of these men is their ability to navigate the Web. This view of the pedophile is perplexing considering that the Internet has become an integral part of the personal and professional lives of most Americans, but these men are not “normal” and harnessing the power of the web allows them to be “one step ahead” of the law (Lee, p. 147). This is apparent in the September 29, 2006 and October 6, 2006 segments of “To Catch a Predator” that took place in Petaluma, California, a suburb of San Francisco and a relatively short drive from the Silicon Valley.

Figure 3: Chris Hansen confronts one of the predators.
During the two shows, pedophiles like mannbay2004 (Valkunth Soundararajan), a software engineer, and alatinoman_559 (Fernando Bernal), a computer support specialist, arrived at NBC’s sting house. This sting also included the most threatening of all predators in regards to technological savvy, a pedophile with a Ph.D. in computer engineering, indianman76 (Anurag Tiwari). It is this relationship with technology that adds to their power, making them more threatening and like the situation Sontag outlines, requiring the combined technologies of disparate groups to take down the “errant individual will of the lone intellectual,” in this case, the predator (p. 48

_Dateline NBC_ found ratings success when its Herndon, Virginia segment aired as an hour long special that netted nineteen men in three days. According to Hansen’s voiceover during the episode, it uncovered “men leading double lives,” including doctors, teachers, and in the case of David Kaye (referred to as redbd by Hansen), a rabbi. In a form of the _Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde_ narrative, Kaye worked as a man of God by day, but according to Hansen’s voiceover, spent his nights “prowling for young men.” “To Catch a Predator” continued to use this narrative of religious men falling lustfully for the body of minors (often boys) in many of its subsequent segments including three men in the Forston, Georgia episode: zavior01 (Christopher Xavier Cannon) worked as a media technician and volunteer pastor for a local church; centtaguy04 (Matthew Cogburn) emphasized his connection to God with the “JESUS ROCKS” banner on his MySpace page; and swgamaleyess (Marvin Harrison Smith II) was not only the “most graphic and disturbing we’ve come across,” according to Hansen, he was also a former Baptist minister. _Dateline NBC_’s decision to focus on these men rather than the dozens of others they apprehended is not solely about creating ratings by recording the fall of
pious men (similar to the media frenzy surrounding Evangelist Ted Haggard). Like the predators mentioned above who employ their vast knowledge of technology to commit these acts, in serving as an intermediary between God and churchgoers, these men are believed to stand closer to God than their congregations. It is for that reason that these monsters can only be destroyed with the combined technologies of Dateline NBC, Perverted Justice, and local law enforcement.

Over the course of Dateline NBC’s twelve segments, it was not surprising to find two or three “mentally challenged” predators arrive at each sting that would often stumble into the sting homes as a very crude connection to the awkward monsters of American horror films. According to Hansen’s voiceover, two of these men, needafriendtotalkto2005 (Adam Daniels) and perfect_buddy_ga (Cody Green) are clearly aware of “what they’ve walked into” as soon as the host appears from behind the black curtain and confronts them. Neither resists arrest, but can only stutter incoherently, pound their arms and chests as a form of self-punishment, and call themselves “stupid.” When bud44800 (Michael Siebert) was first caught during a Riverside, California operation, all the man could muster after first be confronted by Chris Hansen was “oops.” He then began to pace around the room muttering incoherently with his embarrassment wrongly framed for the enjoyment of the audience. As Siebert is pacing he mumbles about how upset his mother is going to be with him –reminiscent of the psychopathic killer’s confessions at the end of Scream (1996)– as Hansen tells viewers that the predator has already spent a year in jail for assault and has some “severe mental issues.”
The Siebert case, along with the other mentally deficient predators, is similar to the horror films that involve physically and “mentally challenged” monsters. Our fear of them does not lie in their superhuman strength or knowledge, but in our inability to predict their actions. These men from “To Catch a Predator” resemble the social pariahs of Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932) as audiences take pleasure in watching these beasts from a distance, but when they break the plane of entertainment and enter normality (and in the case of “To Catch a Predator,” actually enter the home) they become horrific. As Sontag explains, “[There] is an undeniable pleasure we derive from looking at freaks, at beings excluded from the category of the human. The sense of superiority over the freak is conjured in varying proportions with the titillation of fear and aversion makes it possible for moral scruples to be lifted, for cruelty to be enjoyed” (p. 45). Like these boogeymen and freaks, the “mentally challenged” would-be abusers of “To Catch a Predator” are horrific because they do not pander to normality; their ignorance does not allow them to be controlled and therefore it takes special circumstances to destroy them.

Towards the end of “To Catch a Predator’s” run at the top of television ratings lawsuits began to accumulate as lawyers questioned the relationship between *Dateline NBC*, Perverted Justice, and local law enforcement. Prior to *Dateline NBC* getting involved with Perverted Justice, the Internet watchdog group was working with police in various states on a volunteer basis. They set up chats with would-be predators and gave the information to police. However, after NBC approached the group to talk about doing a show, Perverted Justice realized there was money to be made and “auctioned off its services to several networks” (McCollam, p. 31). NBC won the bidding and
became part of the already established Perverted Justice-law enforcement relationship. It was at this point that the wall between the media and the law was destroyed; in a sense, NBC was paying the police. The complex relationship between the three bodies reiterates the drastic measures it takes to destroy a monster. Like the giant lizards and aliens Sontag examines in her essay, these would-be predators were often too powerful to be destroyed by one man and it took a complex network of media, computer technology, and law enforcement to bring them down. With the uncovering of the dealings between the three, Lee’s thesis on the superhuman pedophile is also applicable. It was only by breaking the law –like Lee’s “paedophile hunter[s]”– that these menaces to society could be apprehended, thus ending the threat to society they were posing with their superhuman knowledge of technology, relationships with higher beings, and abnormal mental capacities (Lee, p. 146).

*Sin City*: One Man, One Mission, And No Rules

There are times in horror films when the hero fails to bring the community together. By accident, he discovers the monster, but when he explains the threat “nobody, neither his neighbors nor his colleagues, will believe him” (Sontag, p. 42). The community finally acknowledges the threat, but it is too late and as Sontag explains, when those who previously discredited the hero’s story “are summoned to deal with the situation” they fail miserably and are “massacred” (p. 42). It is from this point forward that the hero takes the reigns, intent on destroying the monster on his own. Like Sontag’s hero who must use the power of science to “discover the thing’s one vulnerable point” in order to “destroy it,” Lee’s “paedophile hunter” must employ the “supernaturally intelligent force…beyond the power of mortal humans” that belong to the
child sexual abuser (Sontag, p. 43; Lee, p. 145). Both men must break the law, but
doing so is necessary to destroy the monster. In *Sin City*, Hartigan (Bruce Willis) takes
this notion to the extreme, but unlike the vigilante films where killing the pedophile
serves as a plot point on the protagonist’s journey to a bigger problem (*The
Exterminator* (1980), *Gone Baby Gone* (2007)), Hartigan’s rescue of Nancy and his hunt
for Yellow Bastard is the crux of the narrative.

*Sin City* oscillates between the following stories: “The Customer is Always Right”
about a hitman (Josh Hartnett); “That Yellow Bastard” (Parts 1 and 2) about Hartigan
saving Nancy (Makenzie Vega/Jessica Alba) from Roark Junior/Yellow Bastard (Nick
Stahl), a child rapist and murderer; “The Hard Goodbye” about Marv (Mickey Rourke)
trying to find the people who killed his woman; and “The Big Fat Kill” about Dwight
(Clive Owen) and a group of prostitutes who are trying to keep the mob and the cops
out of their neighborhood. Because of the nature of this chapter, the focus will be on
“That Yellow Bastard” as Hartigan attempts to keep Nancy from the clutches of first
Roark Junior and then Yellow Bastard. Due to the continual voiceover of Hartigan, the
segment resembles classic film noir, but it also mirrors the conventions of American
horror films.

Initially, Roark Junior’s monstrosity is only connoted in the sense that he looks
relatively “normal” and is only evil in his actions. In “Part One” he is introduced during a
conversation between Hartigan and his fellow officer, Bob (Michael Madsen) and it is
apparent that Roark Junior is a repeat offender. According to Hartigan, “Nancy
Callahan, age eleven” would be Junior’s fourth victim to “be raped and slashed to
ribbons.” It is also clear that the pedophile has the support of his father, a senator, who
is willing to cover up any of his son’s actions. Having the support of money and power makes Junior superhuman before he has even made an appearance on-screen. When Junior first appears, it is only his shadow as he talks seductively to young Nancy who is tied up and fearing for her safety. The scene is reminiscent of the monsters in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922) as the shadow of Junior is cast against the wall at an expressionistic and ominous angle. His words are stereotypical, saying, “You’ve been a very good girl, Nancy” and “Don’t be scared. I’ll be taking you home soon.” His face lacks any significant defects; his motives are what make him monstrous.

From the beginning it is clear that Hartigan must break some laws in order to catch the most heinous of lawbreakers. Hartigan has no support from Bob and cold-cocks him to quell any arguments; Hartigan must go after Junior alone like Sontag’s lone hero and Lee’s “paedophile hunter.” In a voiceover, Hartigan states that he has a heart condition and as he sets out to save Nancy chest pains slow him. Like so many heroes from horror films faced with adversity, Hartigan continues on. He takes out two of Junior’s thugs with cunning, “keeping this one quiet and taking them down fast.” After entering Junior’s warehouse, Hartigan takes out two armed men before Junior shoots him in the shoulder. He stands back up, states in a voiceover, “it is only a flesh wound,” and chases down Junior. Hartigan’s ability to overcome pain adds to his heroic and superhuman quality. Hartigan is not deterred by the fact that Junior is protected with money and power. He goes after him anyhow, going against what has become the norm in Sin City.
Taking down a pedophile is not simple for Hartigan. He must also take down law enforcement—a trend in many films that deal superficially with pedophilia such as The Lost Son (1999) and The Pledge (2000) where the cop must break the law or go against it in order to stop a greater evil. After shooting Junior in the ear, the pedophile shoots back catching Hartigan in the other arm. Hartigan overcomes the pain and according to his voiceover, “takes [Junior’s] weapons away; both of them,” by first shooting him in the hand and then in the crotch. At this point, Bob returns to shoot Hartigan in the back (three times). The scene ends with Hartigan and Junior bleeding and Nancy returning home as police sirens approach. While Junior and Hartigan are enemies, the scene highlights their similarities: as they lay dying it is clear that both men are capable of things normal citizens could never do.

“Part 2” commences with Hartigan lying in a hospital bed and waking to Senator Roark, Junior’s father standing over him. Senator Roark (Powers Boothe) explains to Hartigan that he has set him up to take the fall for Nancy’s abduction and her (fabricated) rape as revenge for Hartigan turning Junior into what Senator Roark calls, “a brain-dead, dickless freak.” It is clear that Hartigan is going to face extreme obstacles in trying to clear his name; the senator has the power to, as he says, “make the whole damn world” play along with him. This adversity is no different than that faced by the heroes of Evil Dead (1981) and Hostel; all must fight to destroy the monster(s) even when outnumbered. Because Senator Roark has paid off the cops and the prosecution Nancy is unable to testify for Hartigan. Rather than admitting that he molested Nancy, Hartigan spends the next eight years in jail taking constant beatings from Senator Roark’s men, but never admitting to the crime.
After eight years, Hartigan stops receiving letters from Nancy and fears that Junior has found her and killed her. This fear is bolstered when Junior, now Yellow Bastard, enters Hartigan’s prison cell and leaves an envelope with what Hartigan says is the “index finger of the right hand of a nineteen year old girl.” Hartigan admits to raping Nancy (although this is false) in order to save her from Junior. According to Hartigan’s voiceover, he literally becomes “a twisted, wretched child molester.” Similar self-destruction as a means to a better end is commonplace in many horror films. In *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) the monster has actually become the antihero at the end of the film as he destroys himself and the evil scientist, Dr. Pretorius. The same can be said for Irena who releases the caged panther to kill herself and quell her threat in *Cat People*. Unbeknownst to Hartigan, this is a set-up for him to lead Yellow Bastard to Nancy. Waiting for him outside of prison is Bob, his old partner, but across the street is Yellow Bastard. The setup runs deeper than just the Roarks and includes law enforcement, an institution that should be on Hartigan’s side.

As was mentioned above, before seeing Junior in “Part 2” the audience is made aware through the words of his father that the boy has become a “freak”. As if his action were not enough to convey his destructive and monstrous behavior, now he looks the part like the freaks of *Freaks* and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). When the new Junior, Yellow Bastard is first introduced, according to Hartigan’s voiceover he “smells awful; like bad food. Like a corpse left in a garbage dumpster in the middle of summer.” Besides his smell, he has visually become a monster. He now has bright mustard colored skin that clashes with the black and white aesthetics of all other characters of the film. He has lost all of his hair and appears as more of a cartoon character or alien.
than an actual human. Yellow Bastard tricks Hartigan into leading him to Nancy, who is now 19, so the pedophile can finish the job that was halted years before.

Yellow Bastard—his monstrosity—continues to follow Hartigan as he looks for Nancy. Eventually, Hartigan finds her, but soon realizes the whole thing is part of Yellow Bastard’s set-up. Hartigan informs Nancy, but as they are driving away Yellow Bastard appears in the car behind them. Hartigan shoots Yellow Bastard as he is driving and rather than bleeding red, the monstrous pedophile bleeds yellow. He swerves off the road as Nancy and Hartigan escape, but when Hartigan returns to make sure Yellow Bastard is dead, the body is gone and according to the hero, “only the stink remains.” Once again, the pedophile has shown his superhuman strength by overcoming a gunshot and car wreck while managing to escape.

Yellow Bastard slips into the car while Hartigan and Nancy are not looking and follows them to a rundown motel. After attacking Hartigan in the shower, Yellow Bastard ties him and Nancy up. Hartigan listens as Yellow Bastard explains the surgeries his father has put him through over the past eight years in an attempt to “grow back that equipment...just so the old fart can hold out some hope of having a grandkid;” the yellow skin a “side effect.” According to Yellow Bastard, while Nancy is “a little old for [his] taste” he is willing to make an exception “taking all night to do dear old Nancy” just as he had with the “dozens, maybe hundreds” of children he molested while Hartigan was in prison. He takes the girl and leaves Hartigan to hang.
The hero overcomes death, swinging back and forth to escape from the noose. This shows the superhuman power of the “paedophile hunter” that Lee explains and that must exist for the destructive monster to be quelled (p. 146). Hartigan kills two of Yellow Bastard’s thugs before driving to Roark Family Farm to stop the pedophile. As he is running through the woods he has to overcome chest pain as he did in “Part 1” and before killing a few more bodyguards, he comes to the barn where Yellow Bastard has Nancy tied up. The expressionistic angles, lighting, and shadows return and the scene harkens back to the early horror monsters as Yellow Bastard whips Nancy and prepares to rape her. In place of his lost phallus, Yellow Bastard pulls out a knife and prepares to cut Nancy. As this is happening, Hartigan approaches, but is shot in the shoulder by one of the thugs. Once again he overcomes the pain, kills two more thugs, and gets to Yellow Bastard before he can molest Nancy. Fighting the chest pain, Hartigan stabs Yellow Bastard, rips off any genitalia he had, and proceeds to beat Yellow Bastard’s skull and crotch until according to Hartigan’s voiceover, all he is doing is “pounding wet chunks of bone into the floor.”

Once again, the pedophile has been destroyed when the hero overcomes all odds. This is similar to the hero or heroine of horror films who must escape a house of horrors and defeat the monster. In the end, after Nancy has been saved, Hartigan kills himself to prevent any further harm to her. He knows that if he lives he will continue to serve as a link and danger to Nancy; somehow Senator Roark would find her and kill...
her. His suicide also provides another link between pedophile and “paedophile hunter” as both are dead and shows that the hero must be willing to do anything in order to defeat the monster and stop the plague of destruction.

Conclusion

Sexual transgressions have always had a place in the media. Throughout the 20th century, newspapers, radio programs, and eventually television have presented stories that involved rape, murder, and child sexual abuse. However, the media has often focused on one side of the story with the monstrous pedophile remaining as a footnote and the victim/abuse being the focus.

Contrary to this, horror films were able to show the monster but only connote what made him such a beast. *Frankenstein*’s monster was said to be evil because he had a criminal brain implanted in his skull; Norman was deranged in *Psycho* (1960) because of the unhealthy relationship he had with his dead mother. However, according to Robin Wood these monsters can actually represent different disparate cultural fears and anxieties including homosexuality, race, and gender. It would not be unfounded, then, to believe that these films might have also been commenting on society’s fear of child sexual abuse.

Contemporary American media products like *Dateline NBC*’s “To Catch a Predator” and *Sin City* combine the attention given to child sexual abuse in media that often ignores the abuser with the conventions of horror film to give a face to the molester, abuser, or pedophile. No longer are they ominous, shadowy figures. They are identifiable and can therefore be destroyed either through the combined skill of
community or the often-immoral acts of the hero. Extreme threats call for extreme measures.

These products represent conservative thoughts on the pedophile, constructing him as clearly monstrous. There are no endearing qualities about him and these conclusions are far from ambivalent. The following chapters look at how the coverage of the child sexual abuser continues to evolve in 21st century American cinema. First there is a movement away from the monstrous abuser and then a shift to representations through which minors are given sexual agency and predators become victims.
CHAPTER 3
FROM DEVIAN TO HUMAN
Representing the Plight of the Pedophile

Mainstream American media—like those of the previous chapter—are forced to present narratives that frame the child molester as monstrous and superhuman to proliferate the cultural myth and appease the dominant ideology. However, independent media, especially independent film, is able to tackle controversial issues like child sexual abuse in a light not often allotted to mainstream cultural products. In these narratives the child molester ceases to be monstrous and attention is given to the exploitative nature of this cultural obsession. This chapter will examine films that reside somewhere between the mainstream media of Chapter 2 and the very independent films discussed in Chapter 4. These semi-independent features were able to reach larger audiences with their novel messages about child sexual abuse, while remaining less threatening than more independent cinema that often reaches smaller audiences with its dissenting messages.

University of Missouri-Kansas City professor Harris Mirkin published “The Pattern of Sexual Politics: Feminism, Homosexuality and Pedophilia” at a time when pedophilia was—and still is—“a highly explosive and emotive cultural term” (Angelides, p. 81). In spring 2002 (three years after the essay’s publication in the Journal of Homosexuality) the Missouri State Legislature took notice of the article and cut $100,000 from the University of Missouri-Kansas City’s budget. “Even though it came from within the academic community,” Mirkin’s article “was considered culturally unacceptable” as he makes the connection between child molesters and two former ghettoized “deviants:”
women and homosexuals (Eveld, p. H1). Like these latter groups, Mirkin believes the contemporary notion of child molestation is a social construction with one large category used to define dozens of very disparate acts. This creates semantic contradiction and results in a fallacious idea of child molestation. According to Mirkin, child molestation will eventually go through the same process that women and homosexuals have in the past century. As the dominant ideology “examines the pattern” and “asks the questions” about contemporary discourse on child molestation, society will give this group political agency and realize that not all cases are clear monster/victim relationships (Eveld, p. H1).

According to Mirkin, the child molester is in “Phase I” of a “two-phase pattern of sexual politics” where the backlash of the dominant ideology is saturating cultural discourse from medicine to the media and showing the molester as unnatural, inhumane, and monstrous (p. 1). By analyzing Little Children (2006) and The Woodsman (2004) this chapter shows that the child molester in semi-independent American cinema has escaped the shadowy world of medical anomaly and cultural pariah and entered into the media spotlight of Mirkin’s “Phase II.” The men in these films are no longer monsters, but flawed human beings battling with unacceptable desires. Unlike the media of Chapter 2, Little Children and The Woodsman acknowledge the plight of the abuser and question contemporary America’s understanding of child molestation.

Mirkin builds on Michel Foucault’s work from The History of Sexuality, Volume I in which Foucault argues that the dominant ideology constructs “four great strategic units” to create a dichotomy between normal and abnormal sexualities (p. 103). Those
that are “normal” remain content, while those that fit into one of Foucault’s four transgressive categories are continually reminded of their difference through cultural products that reiterate heteronormativity (Mirkin, p.3). Prior to beginning the two-phase pattern there must be a moment of realization by the oppressed:

When core deviant group members begin to identify with each other and reject the dominant culture’s assessment of their worth […] the claim is made that the dominant categories are incorrect and changeable social creations (Mirkin, p. 6-7).

For American women this occurred early in the 20th century. Previously, women who questioned their place in society were “dismissed as ‘radical,’ ‘crazy, ‘evil,’ or ‘cult’ figures” (Mirkin, p. 7). With the rise of industrialization men were leaving home for work and women began to congregate, sharing similar opinions about their own oppression. Rather than accepting these ideas, collections of “New Women” “began to threaten male gender roles,” believing that gender dynamics were products of a male dominated society and pushing for control over their own sexuality (p. 3).

Like these “New Women,” after the Stonewall Riots of 1969 gay and lesbian communities around the United States began “to identify with each other and to think of themselves as oppressed rather than evil or inferior” (Mirkin, p. 5). However, for years few questioned the “social constructions” such as “the terms ‘queer,’ ‘pansy’ and ‘fag’” that dominant culture placed on them (Mirkin, pp. 4, 9). Stonewall gave gay and lesbian communities the agency they needed to dispel the caricatures the dominant culture had turned them into.
While the masses tended to remain ignorant about what was happening during second- and first-wave feminist movements and gay liberation, those in power were quick to recognize these threats to the dominant ideology. According to Mirkin, in both cases the techniques of Phase I were dispatched in an attempt to quell the visibility of each movement and prevent the masses from consuming subversive messages that informed them of the plight of these oppressed groups. He explains that the initial step in Phase I is pathologizing the non-heteronormative activity in what he calls “the battle to prevent the battle” (p. 7). These previous conflicts were “framed like a public health crisis” as “the terminology of epidemics [was] used” (p. 7). First wave feminism proliferated pathologies like “hysteria, frigidity, nymphomania, lesbianism, and erotomania” and the liberation of gays and lesbians in the early 1970s brought the return of passé convictions that “homosexuals were sick” (Cryle and Downing, p. 1; Mirkin, p. 10). According to Mirkin, the purpose of Phase I’s rhetoric was to frame these social deviants as “dangerous to the social order” before the deviants themselves were given a public voice allowing the masses to form their own opinions (p. 7).

Once publicity was given to their causes, both groups began Phase II of Mirkin’s “two-phase pattern of sexual politics” (p. 1). At this point it became a political struggle as these former deviant groups fought for political and judicial rights. In 1919 this led to the passage of the 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote. The decision to remove the classification of “homosexuality” as a disease from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973 allowed gays and lesbians into the political battle “where the issues [were] clearly debated” rather than ghettoized by the
dominant powers (Mirkin, p. 12). However, once women and gays/lesbians became political agents the dominant ideology focused on another outsider.

According to Mirkin, after it became clear that feminism and gay liberation were not going to be quelled, the dominant powers were forced to find another sexual deviant:

The campaign [against child molestation and child abuse] became politically important in the late 1970s. Those viewed as child molesters are zealously pursued and entrapped just as homosexuals were, and most of the discussions closely parallel earlier discussions about homosexuals and feminists. Though the targeted causes of the evil have shifted, the perceived evil effects of sexual perversions, and the formulas used to discuss and understand them, have remained remarkably stable (p. 12).

Whereas Simone De Beauvoir and Michael Warner theorized about the othering of women and “queerness” in their respective writings, in contemporary Western societies, the child molester has become the Other. The patriarchal ideology must have an opposite that can be used to clearly demarcate the “self.” After the rise of discourse about child sexuality and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the child sexual abuser became this other. This process has been used to create a hierarchy of sorts, as one major axiom of the United States is that child sexual abuse is worse than any other form of deviance or crime. This was made clear in the previous chapter’s discussion of Fritz Lang’s M as the criminals (murderers and burglars) take it upon themselves to catch the child murderer/molester. This same process appears in the two films discussed later in this chapter as othering allows “normal” people to justify their
treatment of the pedophile and their own transgressions by believing their actions can never have been as horrible as his.

Treating the child abuser in terms of one broad category of “Otherness” has created a nebulous category for child molestation. Mirkin does not believe child sexual abuse does not exist, but that the definitions are fallacious constructions and argues that in years to come, definitions will become more precise, deriding the current construction of child molestation, as it exists in contemporary American culture. Mirkin’s argument becomes presumptive as he can only reference how foreign countries have dealt with ages of consent and definitions of molestation – mainstream America still treats child sexual abuse as a master narrative rather than differentiating between heinous acts of abuse and consensual relationships between mature persons. (p. 17). However, the following sections examine independent American cinema where Mirkin’s thesis has begun to emerge as child molestation enters a gray area between Phase I and Phase II. It is far from acceptable and the child molester remains void of any political agency, but rather than keeping the abuser on the periphery as monstrous and evil, *Little Children* and *The Woodsman* acknowledge the plight of this social deviant and allow for empathy, rather than disdain.

**Post-2000: The Pendulum Begins to Swing Back**

It would be absurd to believe that the majority of contemporary American culture is interested in taking the time to understand the pedophile. Mainstream newspapers around the country cover these stories daily and cable television news outlets like CNN and Fox News use cases of child endangerment to boost ratings for weeks at a time. These stories are rarely covered without presenting the actual abuser as anything more
than a peripheral topic. Shows like *Dateline NBC*’s “To Catch a Predator” are the exception to the rule –although the message remains starkly conservative. For the most part, in this form of coverage the victim and the act of abuse get the headlines; the pedophile plays a bit part. However, there has been a movement in more liberal and independent media to uncover the spurious universality of the child molestation panic. For that reason, after decades of Reaganism, conservativism, and Evangelicalism, the pendulum has begun to slowly return to a more liberal mindset –even if it is only in the nascent stages of development. Some contemporary media outlets are taking similar strides as they question the current ideology of child sexuality and deconstruct the molestation panic.

This movement began soon after Mirkin’s article and other works by James Kincaid, Judith Levine, and Philip Jenkins were published that questioned the construction of the monstrous pedophile, the panic over child sexual abuse, and the mainstream media’s representation of child sexuality. For the most part, independent cinema was taking the lead in visualizing these arguments and attempting to show intergenerational sex and child sexual abuse from different viewpoints. *L.I.E.* (2001) tells the complex story of Howie (Paul Dano), a pubescent boy with an inattentive father who can only find solace and support from Big John (Brian Cox), a pedophile. Big John does come on to Howie, but the boy continues to refuse his requests. However, rather than throwing Howie out, Big John continues to offer him room and board until the boy’s father turns his life around. *Mysterious Skin* (2004) is similar in its complication of the child molestation narrative. As children Neil (Chase Ellison) and Brian (George Webster) are molested by their tee-ball coach (Bill Sage), but during young adulthood
Brian (Brady Corbet) displaces the abuse on to an alien abduction story and refuses to acknowledge his past trauma as anything other than a screen memory. On the other hand, Neil (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) admits that he was aware of what Coach was doing and enjoyed the sex. This notion is difficult to accept because society tends to give little sexual agency to pre-pubescent children. Whereas Brian validates the monstrous narrative of child sexual abuse, Neil rejects it.

Like these two narrative features, independent documentaries like Capturing the Friedmans (2003) and Hungry for Monsters (2004) show the nebulosity of the child molestation panic and the caricature the monstrous pedophile plays within the narrative. In Friedmans the convicted molester, Arnold Friedman is presented through footage of family videos and interviews with various family members as an innocent man. However, this footage is disputed by interviews with other family members, police, lawyers, and alleged victims of Arnold. A confusing representation of the pedophile, rather than a clearly demarcated monstrosity is created and the audience is never given the truth. Hungry for Monsters (2004) documents the trials and tribulations of the Althaus family as teenage daughter Renee accuses the mother and father of forcing her to perform sexual acts on their adult friends. It is later explained that Renee was supposedly being influenced by one of her teachers to say these things to police and that her story was fictitious. However, in the same way that Friedmans ends without disclosing the truth, Hungry for Monsters does not give the audience enough information to discredit either account.

Chicken Hawk: Men Who Love Boys (1994) is another attempt to flesh out the pedophile. This documentary follows members of NAMBLA (North American Man-Boy
Love Association) as they are persecuted by their neighbors and families and shunned by gay and lesbian groups. This film is similar to *Friedmans* and *Monsters* as it ends in ambivalence. Some of the men are rather threatening and impossible to empathize with while others are shown being derided by zealous jingoists. However, as atypical as the film was—with its treatment of pedophiles as humans rather than monsters—it remained an obscure independent. It has rarely been screened for the public and is not available for purchase in any format. Nonetheless, it is an attempt to bring the pedophile to the forefront as a person, rather than a monster.

In many ways, *Little Children* and *The Woodsman* are extensions of *Chicken Hawk* as they frame the daily challenges and perils of living as a social deviant. However, whereas *Chicken Hawk* is almost inaccessible, *Little Children* and *The Woodsman* reached wide audiences in the months following their releases. These two films feature top-tier actors and attracted enough media buzz to transcend their independent production. As a result, *Little Children* and *The Woodsman* present the plight of the abuser to sections of the mainstream masses in ways that other independent films have continually failed.

The Ambiguity of *Little Children*

New Line Cinema, the independent subsidiary of Warner Brothers, produced *Little Children* on a budget of $14,000,000—a relatively small amount of money for any film in contemporary American cinema. It opened in early October 2006 on five screens, but like many films that embody the current trend in American cinema where low budget films gain popularity and then platformed into wider releases, *Little Children* did not stay on the independent theatre circuit for long. Amidst award season buzz the film opened

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2 I was able to access *Chicken Hawk* in separate segments on YouTube.
on more screens and in the weeks leading up to the Academy Awards it was shown in over 100 theaters (Box Office for *Little Children*, ¶ 2). For that reason, *Little Children* transcends its “independent” label to become an amalgam of both independent and mainstream cinema. It is independent in its unconventional message, but significantly different from films like *Capturing the Friedmans* and *Chicken Hawk* as it reached wider audiences.

Through the course of *Little Children* the sexual predator progresses from a diseased sexual deviant to an empathetic human being, moving from Phase I in Mirkin’s “two-phase pattern of sexual politics” to a gray area between II and I (p. 1). The child molester is not yet given political agency, but ceases to be a monster, complicating the master narrative of child sexual abuse—a rare act in American culture. The empathy connoted in *Little Children* has nothing to do with identification with the molester or sympathy. In the words of cognitive theorists Jean Decety and Claus Lamm in their definition of empathy, *Little Children* provides the “ability to experience and understand what others feel without confusion between oneself and others” (p. 1146). The film allows for an understanding of the abuser’s plight, but always keeps a discernable difference between the audience and the molester.

*Little Children* focuses on two very disparate relationships. The relationship between Sarah (Kate Winslet) and Brad (Patrick Wilson) begins as a platonic friendship. They are both stay-at-home parents and as Brad explains, their respective spouses “wear the pants in the family.” Their first encounter occurs at a local park where Sarah approaches Brad as a challenge from three other women who do not know his name, but refer to him simply as “the prom king.” Throughout the course of the film Brad and
Sarah become more intimate, spending their days at the community pool, and play active roles in each other’s lives. The relationship peaks when the two adults have sex in Sarah’s basement washroom while their children nap.

The second relationship involves Larry (Noah Emmerich) and Ronnie (Jackie Earle Haley). Larry has lost his job as a policeman so as chairman of the “Committee for Concerned Parents” he shifts his attention towards making Ronnie’s life difficult. Ronnie has returned to Woodward Court after serving two years in prison for “indecent exposure to a minor.” In many ways their relationship resembles the relationship between pedophile and pedophile hunter discussed in Chapter 2. Unlike the rest of the Woodward Court community, Larry goes above and beyond to pursue Ronnie. He spends an egregious amount of time hanging posters to remind residents that Ronnie has returned, continually talks about Ronnie as if nothing else can divert his mission, and often shows up at Ronnie’s home in the middle of the night to harass him with a bullhorn. Adding to Larry’s overarching zeal in stalking Ronnie, later in the film it is learned that Larry has lost his job for killing an innocent teenager he mistook for a burglar. While Larry continually reasserts the nature of Ronnie’s crime to be worse than his own, it does provide a bond between the two as molester and pursuer.

In Mirkin’s terms, methods of “Phase I sexual politics” dominate the first half of *Little Children* as Ronnie is continually referred to as a pervert and dangerous predator p. 1). The opening sequence features various news reports from the front of Ronnie’s home explaining that members of the Woodward Court community are now living with “a dangerous predator in their midst.” Interviewed community members make it clear that they now feel threatened with Ronnie in the neighborhood: “I think it is outrageous. This
block has too many children for a sex offender to be moving into the neighborhood;” “It’s like having an alcoholic working in a bar. The two just should not mix.” The audience is subject to viewing these reports through the eyes of Ronnie who is watching the news as cameramen and reporters are stationed on his front lawn.

Subsequent scenes sculpt Ronnie through the eyes of the dominant ideology of Woodward Court. While the gossiping mothers are watching their children play in the park they shift their attention to Ronnie’s return to the neighborhood. One of the mothers quips, “He should just be castrated. Quick and clean. Just chop it off.” In a subsequent scene, as Brad is sitting along the road Larry pulls up yelling “Hey pervert! Yeah, you pervert!” knowing it is Brad, but making a joke out of Ronnie’s return to Woodward Court. Brad gets in and Larry continues, “You know what they should do to this bastard? You castrate him. You know, get it over with.” The idea of castration posed by the mother and Larry reiterates one barbaric action dominant ideology resorts to when dealing with its sexual abusers.

As Mirkin points out, such techniques were used on “sexual deviants” during the 20th century, including ovariectomies for hysterical women and castration for gay men (p. 19). As late as the 1990s, many states employed “chemical castration” to quell the threat of child sexual abusers (Kincaid, p. 90). The topic has returned to the headlines recently as Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal “authorized judges in [Louisiana] to order chemical castration of convicted rapists upon their release” (Murphy, ¶ 7). Texas remains the only state in the Union that authorizes complete castration or “the physical removal of the testes” with the consent of offenders (Murphy, ¶ 11). These are calculated actions in the “battle to prevent the battle.” By turning the child sexual abuser
into something unnatural, the dominant ideology can keep him from acquiring any form of political agency and informing the public of his struggle.

Ronnie’s initial immorality and monstrousness is depicted through the words of community members like the mothers in the park and Larry, and then through the actions of Ronnie. As Brad and Sarah are spending an afternoon with their children at the community pool along with dozens of other children and parents, Ronnie appears wearing scuba gear, resembling *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). He is a scrawny, bald man who embodies stereotypical portrayals of pedophiles throughout American media: “dark, sinister, [and] alien-looking” (Mirkin, p. 8). At first, no one recognizes Ronnie even though the “pervert” has pervaded the news and his face is plastered on every building and phone pole in Woodward Court. When Ronnie enters the water he does not simply take part in a swim; it is clear that he is enjoying himself watching the bottom halves of children swimming around him. With his snorkel and goggles he navigates subaqueous, circling children who are paying little attention to the threat the Ronnie poses. Parents soon take notice of Ronnie and, like the beach scene from *Jaws* (1975), they run screaming to the water to save their children. For a moment, Ronnie surfaces to stare at those who are staring wide-eyed at him, but then returns to his underwater sanctuary. He swims for a few moments in total dejection. The camera hovers high above the pool and Ronnie resembles a lone goldfish in a massive aquarium being watched by bystanders taken by the novelty of the child sexual abuser. It is clear that he is embarrassed and rather than demonizing his actions, the scene provides only ambivalence. This is the first moment in the film where Ronnie becomes a
human being rather than an incommunicable monster confined to the imprisonment of his home.

Any empathy the viewer may be feeling for Ronnie after the pool scene or the continual harassment from Larry is fleeting. At his mother’s request, Ronnie agrees to post a personal ad in the “Classifieds.” He meets Sheila (Jane Adams) and the two share a bond because of their diagnosed mental instability and their failure to maintain adult relationships. It appears that Ronnie may be turning a corner in his life. However, this sentiment disappears during the ride home as Ronnie begins to masturbate in front of Sheila. When she looks at him and begins to cry, Ronnie threatens, “You better not tell on me or I’ll fucking get you.” At this point, any empathy for Ronnie is destroyed.

It would appear that the evolution that Mirkin speaks of stalls at this point in Little Children. There is no move to Phase II and Ronnie is clearly identified as “psychotic” and “sick” (pp. 7 and 9). However, Ronnie’s transgressions are offset by the non-heteronormativity and hypocrisy of the residents of Woodward Court. To begin with, the women in the park attempt to protect their children from eroticism. When Sarah kisses Brad in front of the children and the mothers, one of the mothers grabs her child and quips, “I’m sure your daughter found that very educational.” Their protective actions are made hypocritical as they gather daily to gossip about their own unfulfilling sex lives with their children only feet away. One mother—who appears later walking door-to-door to warn parents that Ronnie has been seen riding his bike near the park— even makes the comment that when her son was a baby she was amazed by the size of his penis: “I opened the diaper and it was huge.” These women want sex to be a nonfactor, yet their conversations continually become erotic. Similar failed attempts to desexualize children
occur later as Brad gets into bed with his wife, Kathy (Jennifer Connelly) and attempts foreplay. She stops him and points to the fact that their son is lying asleep between them. However, this does not stop them from partaking in a passionate kiss as both are in their underwear inches from their sleeping child.

Failing to recognize the impossibilities of keeping children away from anything sexual is not the only example of the dominant ideology’s faulty conceptions of children and sex. Everyone in Woodward Court is “queer” in the sense that all are shown partaking in non-heteronormative sexual relations. Brad and Sarah are cheating on their spouses. Larry’s affection for Brad appears more than homosocial when he first greets him with, “Looking good. You been working out” and then continues following him around like a love-struck teenager. Kathy appears to be stuck in an Oedipal triangle with her mother who still controls much of her daughter’s life, including giving her a monthly allowance. This also debunks the stereotypical framing of Ronnie’s relationship with his mother as unnatural. Perhaps no more queer is Sarah’s husband, Richard (Gregg Edelman) who is addicted to porn and masturbates with a pair of used panties he purchased from online vixen, “Slutty Kay.”

If the community represents patriarchal capitalism and the dominant American ideology they are not quarantined from transgressive sexualities. The whole neighborhood has skeletons, but the heinous nature of Ronnie’s actions divert the attention of Woodward Court residents so that they do not have to focus on the immorality of their own lives. The citizens are able to focus on Ronnie, seeing him as the ultimate “Other” while forgetting about their own depravity. This framing resembles early strategies within Phase II of Mirkin’s essay where sexual deviants “talk as though
they can force the dominant society to change, and they tend to challenge and
demonize it, attaching labels like patriarchy and white power structure” (Mirkin, p. 6).
While the residents believe their actions are not as sinister as Ronnie’s, the film frames
a community of hypocritical transgressors.

*Little Children* ends with Sarah and Brad ending their relationship not because
they have acquired a new sense of maturity, but because Brad needs the income of his
wife to survive and because Sarah cannot leave her daughter. Larry inadvertently
causes the death of Ronnie’s mother
when Larry arrives at the home to harass
the sex offender. On her deathbed she
writes a note to Ronnie that reads,
“Please be a good boy” and when Ronnie
finds it while cleaning out her hospital suitcase he becomes hysterical. Ronnie cuts of
his penis knowing that the only way to appease the community is to quell his
unacceptable desires. He walks to the playground and continues to cry softly to himself.
Larry arrives, after going to Ronnie’s house to apologize, and discovers the dying
Ronnie. He picks him up like a child and carries him to help. The film ends with the
narrator professing, “He knew Ronnie had done some bad things in the past, but so had
Larry. He knew he could not change the past, but the future could be a different story.
And it had to start somewhere.” The narrator never appears in the flesh –only as a voice
to set up the narrative– and appears sparingly throughout the film. He is aware of all
that goes on in Woodward Court and like the audience, knows of the unsavory actions
of the residents. As a result, these parting words connote some hope, but in many ways

![Figure 5: Ronnie prepares to castrate himself.](image-url)
they seem sarcastic. Like the audience, the narrator has followed the actions of the community and knows that their immoralities are not likely to cease.

Framing Woodward Court as a neighborhood of “little children” unable to escape the politics of the playground rather than a community of adults discredits the dominant ideology that the main characters are supposed to represent. The film opens with the catty women gossiping in the playground and ends with Larry carrying Ronnie out of the same park. The adults still embody the stereotypical adolescent personalities of junior high and high school: bitchy teens (the three women Sarah meets daily in the playground), the bookworm (Sarah), and “the prom king” (Brad). Larry and Ronnie serve as the unpopular outsiders that only find friendship in the end when they discover a shared ostracism. If the “normal” adults are unable to conduct themselves in a mature and heteronormative manner, than calling the acts of Ronnie perverted or unnatural seems ridiculous. Like American media analyzed in the previous chapter, Little Children begins as a product of Phase I sexual politics with the “battle to prevent the battle” being played out. Ronnie is called a “pervert” by the Woodward Court community and is refused human decency. However, as the film progresses it becomes clear that there is no normality and that the dominant ideology is as a perverted as the deviants it continually “others.” The film shifts into a nebulous place between Phases II and I as Ronnie becomes one example of flawed humanity in a community filled with people who fail to follow the dominant ideology. It is at this point in Little Children that the plight of the sex offender is highlighted and Ronnie becomes an empathetic character rather than the despised monster of mainstream media’s treatment of child sexual abuse.
Newmarket Films, a privately owned independent subsidiary of Newmarket Capital Group that specializes in financially viable independent and foreign films, produced *The Woodsman*. The company also produced *Monster* (2003), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), and *The Prestige* (2006), three films with A-list actors that created significant Academy Awards attention and/or revenue. *The Woodsman* opened on six screens in early December 2004 and was platformed to include more screens by the time Academy Awards voting began. At the end of January 2005 it was showing in over 85 theatres around the country (Box Office for *The Woodsman*, ¶ 1 and ¶ 3). However, it failed to reach the level of popularity and prominence of *Little Children*, and was soon exiled to DVD. As one reviewer put it, “Who wants such a nasty subject around at Oscar time, ruining the fun?” (Cooper, p. 20). Nonetheless, *The Woodsman*’s (brief) major market saturation allowed it to reach a larger audience than most independent films with its controversial take on the child sexual abuse narrative.

While *Little Children* focuses on the difficulties of being a registered sex offender in the last half of the film, most of the film focuses on the community’s situation. *The Woodsman* is not about the community; it is about the difficulties the offender, Walter (Kevin Bacon) must face as he tries to reenter society. With Walter viewers have a continual “awareness of a distinction between the experiences of the self and others,” that according to cognitive theorists “constitutes a crucial aspect of empathy” (Decety and Lamm, p. 1146). Unlike the monstrous molesters of mainstream media, viewers are asked to recognize Walter’s plight as he attempts to return to normalcy by battling his desires.
Walter is a convicted sex offender released after 12 years in prison for having sex with girls who were, according to him, “between ten and twelve and once a nine-year-old who said she was eleven and once a fourteen-year-old [who] said she was twelve.” He gets a job at a lumberyard and finds an apartment (conveniently) located across from an elementary school. Various characters come in and out of Walter’s life, including his new girlfriend, Vicki (Kyra Sedgwick), his brother-in-law, Carlos (Benjamin Bratt), a court appointed psychiatrist (Michael Shannon), his parole officer (Mos Def), coworker Mary Kay (Eve), and another pedophile Walter nicknames Candy (Kevin Rice), who roams the neighborhood. Except for Vicki, whom Walter moves in with at the end of the film, all characters move in and out of Walter’s post-prison life as he attempts to “be normal” and resist the temptation that led to his initial imprisonment.

From the beginning it is clear that Walter has committed child sexual abuse and the audience is not asked to condone his actions but to see Walter as a flawed human being. As Carol-Ann Hooper and Ann Kaloski state in their essay “Rewriting ‘The Paedophile:’ A Feminist Reading of The Woodsman,” the goal of the film is to “counter [the] demonization, while not in any sense obscuring the distress and harm that child sexual abuse can cause” (p. 149-150). The opening sequence shows a computer monitor as an off-screen person enters Walter’s information into a sex offender database. A voiceover can be heard telling Walter what he can and cannot do as a registered offender. The sequence emphasizes the lack of autonomy that registered sex offenders have because of the watchful eye that is always following them. Philadelphia, the city he returns to, is bleak and conveys a sense of hopelessness with ominous grays, ever-present clouds, and industrial parks void of humanity. It is obvious that
Walter will be waging a battle within himself, especially considering that he is reentering a world that views his acts as monstrous.

Hooper and Kaloski argue that the film assists audience empathy by refusing to show Walter’s previous acts “so as viewers we never gaze on that kind of ‘realist’ representation” (p. 153). This prevents the disturbance often caused by visualizations of non-heteronormative sex. There are also moments in the film when the audience is forced to recognize Walter’s desires. The viewer is positioned “in relation to desire for children, in various ways that together unsettle any fixed boundary around ‘abuse’” while watching from Walter’s perspective (p. 153). These scenes occur as Walter follows a group of pre-pubescent girls in a shopping mall and later on a bus. In both cases, “the camera attempts to capture his temptation” (Hooper and Kaloski, p. 153). Unlike the masturbation scene in Little Children, The Woodsman does not offer the audience a moment of overt disgust and allows the bond between viewer and Walter to remain strong.

The morbidity of Walter’s surroundings and the refusal of the film to show any acts that could cause disgust allow for empathy and recognition of the molester’s plight as he reenters society and attempts to be normal. However, it is the framing of Walter through various relationships and points of view that “denies the viewer any simplistic identification or thinking” (Hooper and Kaloski, p. 152). Because of this, The Woodsman destroys the generalizations of molesters as “diseased,” “unnatural,” or “nihilistic” found in Phase I of Mirkin’s sexual politics pattern (p. 7). Instead, the film accedes to Phase II methods by drawing attention to the “individual variations” of the child sexual abuse narrative and forces the viewer to recognize the plight of the molester (Mirkin, p. 14).
Only two characters in the film have a personal relationship with Walter to the point that they know what he has done, yet allow him to be a part of their life: Vicki, a coworker who eventually becomes Walter’s girlfriend and Carlos, Walter’s brother-in-law. While Vicki accepts Walter almost immediately even after he tells her what he has done, Carlos is more apprehensive and embodies a more stereotypical portrayal of how friends and family members treat convicted abusers. Carlos feels obligated to reestablish his relationship with Walter because Walter was the only member of his family that supported his sister Annette’s decision to marry Carlos. In their visits it is clear that conversations are strained and Carlos tiptoes around the subject of his and Annette’s 12-year-old daughter whom Walter is barred from seeing. Instead, the conversations shift to overtly masculine topics like beer, sports, and women. Nonetheless, Carlos and Walter have a decent relationship even if it is superficial.

Towards the middle of the film, the relationship takes a drastic hit as Carlos and Walter are having beers at a local bar. Carlos brings up the fact that he finds his daughter’s friends attractive, but when Walter intuits about the feelings, Carlos freaks out: “I ain’t got your sick fucking disease!” The moment reiterates the tenuous line that is drawn between an adult that sexually desires a minor, finding him/her attractive as Carlos admits, and an adult that acts on those desires, as Walter has been imprisoned for in the past. When adults harbor desires that are considered immoral, attacking those that act upon those desires reasserts the threat of child sexual abuse while providing a monstrous “Other” to define “good” against. Carlos derides Walter because Walter’s immoral behavior is the lone difference between the two men.
At the end of the film, Walter and Carlos meet again as Carlos brings his wife, Annette to talk with Walter, her brother. It is during this scene that the audience feels the most empathy for Walter. Throughout the film Walter has been attempting to get Carlos to talk Annette into meeting him. When Walter attempts to put his arm around Annette she throws it off and walks away. It appears that she will continue to shun him and that his past actions are too much for Annette to overcome at this point. This is a painful scene and as the camera focuses on Walter’s face, it is clear that he is hurt. The audience is asked to empathize with the molester at this point. It is clear that what he has done is wrong, but throughout the film Walter has been made human, flawed rather than diseased.

Walter’s coworkers serve as a stand-in for society as a whole. They accept him when he first arrives at the lumberyard and it is intimated that Walter is not the only released criminal working there. However, when the lumberyard’s intrusive secretary begins to pry into Walter’s past, his coworkers begin to distance themselves from him. Mary Kay, who believes Walter’s crimes to be worse than “armed robbery or murder,” finds Walter’s picture on a registered sex offender website and plasters his profile throughout the workplace. Soon coworkers are threatening him and asking for Walter to be fired. It is clear that Walter believes he will be fired because of the discomfort his past actions cause his coworkers. After they make their feelings known, Walter’s manager, Bob (David Alan Grier) begins walking towards Walter. Both the audience and Walter assume Bob is going to fire Walter. Bob bypasses Walter and proceeds to another worker, but viewers get a sense of Walter’s continual paranoia and the scene reasserts the fine line that Walter walks on a daily basis.
Walter’s relationships with his court-appointed psychiatrist and his parole office represent the way molesters are treated by repressive discourses of the dominant ideology, in this case medicine and law. Walter’s visits with his psychiatrist are ineffective as the doctor employs the “talking cure” and listens to Walter speak rather than actually helping him. The problem with this is that Walter is not necessarily diseased. In previous scenes with his girlfriend Vicki, it is clear that he is beginning to adapt to life outside of prison and is shedding his introverted ways. The psychiatrist’s visits never seem to get past Walter asking, “When will I be normal?” The doctor is unable to provide him with an answer (if one exists) and Walter resorts to thinking rather than talking. Later in the film Walter asks the doctor, “Do you think I am crazy?” only to be answered with, “Do you think you’re crazy?” This cyclical relationship serves the purpose of not only showing that Walter is not mentally unstable; it suggests the futile nature of psychology in terms of child sexual abusers. The dominant ideology prefers to classify child molesters as mentally unstable in order to separate them from the masses. At times this works—certainly, Little Children’s Ronnie lacks the mental stability of Walter—but there is no alternative for when it does not. This concept of futility is reiterated in the latter half of the film as the psychiatrist attempts to pathologize Walter and uncover (fictitious) repressed memories of Walter molesting his younger sister when the two were children. After continual prying, Walter refuses to acknowledge any such act and reaffirms to his doctor, “I just liked smelling her hair.” Classifying all child molesters as mentally unsound rather than acknowledging the disparate forms of child sexual abuse is misleading and discredits the medical/psychological institutions’ treatment of abusers.
Walter’s parole officer Sergeant Lucas also functions as a stand-in for one of patriarchy’s institutions of power: law and order. Lucas is first introduced as he barges into Walter’s apartment and begins going through his things. He expects to find Walter in the middle of some heinous act and when he is proved wrong he asserts his qualms with “pieces of shit” like Walter returning to the community. Lucas makes it clear to Walter that he will have him under 24 hour surveillance “until [he is] caught re-offending and returned to prison” (Hooper and Kaloski, p. 152). The idea that law enforcement – as a stand-in for the dominant institution as a whole – has no confidence in Walter reinforces the struggles he is up against. Lucas calls him a “freak” and compares him to the wolf in “Little Red Riding Hood.” Not only must Walter strive to return to “normalcy,” something that may or may not exist, he also must be careful not to do anything that could be considered deviant, even when it is out of his control. Such is the case in the final sequence of the film as Lucas arrives at Walter’s apartment to question him about a boy that has been abused in the neighborhood. While the viewer and Walter both know that Walter is innocent, Lucas immediately assumes that Walter has committed the sexual abuse. The scene conveys the helplessness of released sex offenders who are forced to fight their inner desires at the same time that society wants them to fail.

The viewer knows that Walter has not abused the boy because Walter has spent the entire film following the abuser, who he nicknames Candy. Throughout the narrative Walter stares out his window and watches while Candy attempts to convince a young boy to enter his car (stereotypically using candy and other treats). Towards the end of the film, Walter returns to his apartment only to find a young boy getting out of Candy’s

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3 While there is never any indication within the film that Sgt. Lucas is the parole officer assigned to Walter’s case (he appears to be more of a local police officer), Hooper and Kaloski and a few reviews of the film refer to Sgt. Lucas as such.
car. Enraged, Walter beats Candy to a pulp as the molested boy runs off. In his article “Imagining Intergenerationality: Representations and Rhetoric in the Pedophile Movie,” Jon Davies argues that the audience is supposed to identify with Walter as “this act functions as a public service in a way that other forms of cathartic violence would not” (p. 372). In this reading, it would appear that Walter’s heterosexual molestations are not as sinister as Candy’s homosexual ones.

While Davies’s argument may be valid, it is too shallow. Walter’s prior abuses surface numerous times throughout the film as a means to create distance between himself and the viewer. The audience is not supposed to identify with Walter in the usual cinematic sense. Instead, we are asked to recognize his plight and empathize with his struggles while always having “self/other awareness” (Decety and Lamm, p. 1148). This awareness is what differentiates sympathy from empathy and allows The Woodsman to make such an assertion without upsetting viewers. As a result, the scene is closer to Hooper and Kaloski’s reading of the scene as Walter “beating up/defeating/distancing himself from the ‘paedophile’ part of himself” and the desire that continually approaches him throughout the film. The audience is not supposed to take part in Walter’s actions; rather viewers are supposed to watch from a distance in order to recognize the plight of a convicted sex offender released into a world that for the most part still considers him a monster. In terms of Mirkin’s essay, this portrayal attacks the dominant ideology, as the
molester is no longer a caricature in the child sexual abuse narrative, but rather a fully developed character whose struggles and agency in sexual politics must be recognized.

Conclusion

The independent productions of Little Children and The Woodsman allowed these two films to tackle child molestation in ways that mainstream American cinema could not. Unlike the villains of the previous chapter that represent the new target of the dominant ideology, Ronnie and Walter are presented as flawed human beings rather than monsters. Little Children and The Woodsman do not ask the audience to identify with their respective abusers. Placing viewers in the shoes of convicted child molesters is too bold of a move even for an independent film. However, these films portray the pedophile as empathetic antiheros. These films do not question whether or not the abusers’ previous actions were wrong. They clearly are. However, audiences are asked to recognize the plight of abusers and see them as people rather than monsters.

The ability of independent cinema to comment on peripheral topics that mainstream American cinema cannot is highlighted again in the next chapter as smaller budget films begin to question the notion of childhood innocence and asexuality. Like the offenders in Little Children and The Woodsman, the adults in the two films discussed next are not framed as unnatural or monstrous. However, this next chapter differs from previous chapters because no longer is the child an innocent victim. S/he is not only given sexual agency, but also becomes the aggressor.
CHAPTER 4

CHILD DERANGEMENT

Child Sexuality and the Sexual Predator in 21st Century American Media

Whereas aforementioned TV and cinema received significant publicity – even the semi-independent films of Chapter 3 – the media discussed in this chapter failed to reach mass audiences and lacked any form of critical acclaim. The treatment of child sexuality and child sexual abuse in these films was too radical for many mass audiences. As a result, Birth and Hard Candy lacked the success and availability of aforementioned media.

Controversial work on child sexuality is not necessarily rare in the United States. Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita has become an iconic novel in modern times. However, when first published the book received the same contempt from the masses as the films to be discussed later. It is no coincidence that Nabokov wrote Lolita during “the evenings and cloudy days” of his family’s summer trips throughout the United States (Nabokov, p 312). Lolita truly is America: a place where sex is unspoken, yet simultaneously saturates the culture. Since Nabokov had the novel published in France in 1955 (1958 in the United States) American still exists as a place where children are said to be void of sexuality, yet made-up like adult beauty queens.

Stanley Kubrick’s Lolita (1962) was a rarity in American media at the time of its release. Kubrick may have found a window in Hollywood where he could represent child sexuality overtly, but Hollywood soon returned to its conservative morals and child sexuality was thrown to the periphery of American cinema. If it surfaced at all it was only connoted and destructive: the demonic children of The Omen (1976) or Halloween
(1978) that were reincarnated in numerous sequels throughout the following decades; the children of *Lord of the Flies* (1963) were younger than the children of *Kids* (1995), but still as hopeless. However, Nabokov (and Kubrick) created two sides to the child sexuality story: Lolita was far from asexual and Humbert was less than a monster.

When Hollywood went back to more traditional narratives there was no longer any room for depth in characters like Humbert whose obsession with Dolores Haze was less about lust than it was about love. The Humberts soon became enigmatic pedophiles. However, in recent years American cinema—though mostly independent—has shown a willingness to produce narratives in which the child’s sexuality is commingled with the desire of the adult. This creates an ambiguous narrative in which neither party is solely to blame. This chapter focuses on two American films of the last decade that come closer to Nabokov’s narrative than any of their predecessors. In *Birth* (2004) and *Hard Candy* (2005) the relationship between the pursued and the pursuer is not clearly the victim/predator dichotomy of previously mentioned films. For that matter, the relationship is much different than films such as *The Woodsman* and *Little Children*. In those films pedophilia is understood as a pathological problem and while the offender may be diseased and possibly empathetic, he is still guilty. In neither *Birth* nor *Hard Candy* is one person clearly to blame because the line between predator and prey is tenuous. Unlike American media’s master narrative of child molestation, the minors in these films are far from asexual and their actions create ambiguities about abuser and victim.
The Creation of a Modern Myth

In his book on America’s relationship with child sexual abuse, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, James Kincaid explains the “contemporary discourse on children, sexuality, and assault is so mighty that it comes close to defining our moment” (p. 6). According to Kincaid, the intensity with which society has attempted to suppress child sexuality over the last twenty-plus years has actually created the opposite and instead generated a modern myth:

Our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing […]. We allow so much power to the child’s sexual appeal that we no longer question whether adults are drawn to children (p. 13-14).

Kincaid argues that society tells children not to be sexual so that they can appear to be all that adults are not: “sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous” (p. 14). The problem is that these same characteristics also describe all of the things that are desirable; all the things that American culture eroticizes. Kincaid explains that it has come to the point where “we learn to see ‘the child’ and ‘the erotic’ as coincidental” therefore we long to “possess” the child (p. 14).

This is a harsh attack on our society, but Kincaid backs up his claim by examining the media icons of the last two decades:

Both men and women rate “younger-looking faces and faces with ‘babylike’ features” tops on the “physical attractiveness” scale. Compare the waif or schoolgirl images in fashion magazines to actual waifs in playgrounds and homes […] Compare [Macaulay] Culkin, Elijah Wood, the
young Ricky Schroder with Alicia Silverstone, Demi Moore, Winona Ryder, and Sandra Bullock. They all look like cartoon characters: Buster Brown or Betty Boop –images vacated so we can write our passion there (p. 20-21).

It is harrowing to conceptualize, but when looking at these cultural images it is clear that our culture eroticizes the child-like.

According to Kincaid, America resents the child because what s/he has become represents an untouchable desire. Hollywood has quelled some of this angst with films that demonize the child and justify their punishment. Kincaid references The Omen and Halloween because in both films the innocent children are made a “little less innocent so that we can massacre them” (p.158). Punishing of “bad kids” also occurs outside of fiction media. The age of consent continually gets higher in various states –in the past election, South Carolina raised it from 14 to 16– yet minors are continually tried for serious crimes. It was not until 2005 that the U.S. Supreme Court abolished capital punishment for juveniles and for nearly a decade, the United States was the only country in the world still executing its minors (Lane, p. A01; Kincaid, p. 155).

These horror films not only appeal to adult audiences, they reassert the complex relationship American has with its youth. If we enjoy watching children being punished in a fiction film, it is easy to believe that there are others who are unable to control their transgressions. This type of media provides society with a monster to protect the children from. By continually seeing the pedophile as an outside threat society is able to ignore the threat that comes from within. Kincaid attributes the growing concern with sexual predators and the “outlandish” coverage of them –such as Dateline NBC’s “To Catch a Predator” examined in Chapter 2– to the “escalating ambivalence toward the
child, along with the unresolved and unacknowledged sexual tension we have loaded onto them” (p. 167). This leads to an attempted desexualization and a concomitant eroticization, from which arises the modern myth of molestation with exaggerated claims, statistics, and repercussions too cumbersome to acknowledge.

*Birth* and *Hard Candy* reverse the myth of the passive child and the active (male) abuser. Unlike the films and media that have come before, these two independent films turn the child into a sexualized being consciously aware of its actions. As a result, the sexual predator is much different from the monstrous abusers of Chapter 2 and the empathetic abusers of Chapter 3. *Birth* not only complicates the mass narrative of abuse by having a female “abuser,” it also exhibits a child on the offensive. In a similar way, *Hard Candy* transforms a minor from androgynous to sexual throughout the course of the film and frames her as monstrously aggressive as many of the pedophiles portrayed in American media. These two films embody the frustration Kincaid conveys in his writing. They break down the mass narrative of child molestation and ask viewers to look at the story—which has become so powerful in mainstream American media—from a very different and critical angle.

*Birth*: Stretching the Limits of American Cinema

*Birth* was director Jonathan Glazer’s second film (after the celebrated independent feature *Sexy Beast*) and while far from a blockbuster production, it was a semi-independent film produced by New Line Cinema. Compared to the treatment of intergenerational sex or pedophilic themes by most of its Hollywood counterparts, *Birth* includes child sexuality as an element that blurs the line between predator and prey. Taking this into account, it is no surprise it received lukewarm reviews from
Entertainment Weekly (C-), Rolling Stone (3/4 stars), and audiences (6.0/10 in the Internet Movie Database’s poll of nearly 13,000). It was produced for $20 million, released in early November 2004, and after two months, it grossed a little over $5 million. Compare that to Sin City – a massive Hollywood production that deals with pedophilia and clearly demarcates the predator from the prey– which was made for twice as much as Birth, but grossed nearly fifteen times more. If box office numbers are any indication, it is clear what mainstream audiences want out of their pedophile movies. The majority of Birth offers only ambiguity as it wavers between disassociation from the flawed adult and discomfort with the erotic child. Birth is not able to be as invasive as foreign or more independent films of the same nature (such as The Woodsman), but it does push the boundaries of child sexuality and complicates the notion of consensual sex between a minor and an adult.

The film begins with a man (Michael Desautels) running through a snow-covered Central Park only to fall to his knees and die. This is followed by a short sequence of a child being born and then cut to “10 years later.” The man –whose name was Sean– is survived by his wife, Anna (Nicole Kidman). She is now engaged to Joseph (Danny Huston) and living in an Upper East End apartment. During a birthday party for Anna’s mother, Eleanor (Lauren Bacall), a 10-year-old boy (Cameron Bright) enters the apartment and in front of friends and family, proclaims that he is the reincarnation of Anna’s deceased husband and that she should not marry Joseph. Anna shoos the child –whose name also happens to be Sean– away, but later as she lies in bed it is clear that she has been affected by the situation.
The next day Anna receives a letter from Sean that reiterates the situation. Joseph learns of the letter, finds the boy in the lobby of the apartment building where Joseph and Anna live, and drags him to his father who is tutoring someone in the same building. Joseph explains the situation to the father (Ted Levine) and Anna tells Sean she does not believe any of his claims. As she and Joseph walk down the hall Sean collapses to the floor. It soon becomes clear that while Anna has told Sean she does not believe his claim of being the soul of her dead husband in the body of a boy, she is mulling over the idea.

A large portion of the film involves Anna, Joseph, and various family and friends attempting to catch Sean in a lie. Unfortunately, this does not occur and Anna begins to believe the boy’s story. After her dead husband’s best friend, Clifford (Peter Stormare) – who has been summoned by Anna to verify/discredit Sean’s story—tells her the boy is lying she is not dissuaded because she wants her desire for the boy to be acceptable which is only possible if he is the reincarnation of her husband. Anna then plans for their escape since the boy’s family, her family, and society disapprove of their relationship. It is not until Clara (Anne Heche) –the wife of Clifford and ex-mistress of the adult Sean—brings the boy to her apartment and tells young Sean she knows he is lying. We learn that out of jealousy, Clara had planned to give Anna a package of love letters she had acquired from the elder Sean during their affair. The letters were between Anna and Sean, but Clara’s possession of them would have proved the affair and ruined Anna’s memory of her dead husband. Rather than giving the letters to Anna, Clara buried them outside of the apartment building where the young Sean later found them. Through the letters he was able to learn about Anna and continue his fib throughout the film. The film
ends with Anna as an emotional wreck on her wedding day, broken by the desire those around her considered wrong. Young Sean returns to school and begins seeing a therapist for his unacceptable transgressions.

*Birth* was marketed somewhere between a ghost story and a psychological drama. The theatrical trailer connotes a supernatural love story between a woman and a boy, suggesting that because Sean is really a dead man’s soul inside the body of a 10-year-old, Anna’s falling in love with him is justified. *New York Times*’ A.O. Scott called the film “a suave and brooding gothic tale” and “like one of Henry James’s ghost stories, it stakes out an agnostic, ambiguous position on the existence of supernatural phenomena” (Scott, p. E-PT1). Not surprisingly, due to the waif-like look and “pixie haircut” of Nicole Kidman, reviewers of the film compared Anna to Mia Farrow’s role as Rosemary in the horror film, *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968). Interestingly, David Denby of *The New Yorker* saw “Cameron Bright’s face as a fright; it’s one of those glowering demon-child masks from ‘Damien: Omen II’ era of horror films” which reiterates aforementioned arguments of James Kincaid on films that demonize the child because the resentment our culture feels toward their eroticism (Denby, p. 145).

*Birth* is able to get away with many things considered wrong by disguising itself as a film about supernatural love, reincarnation, or a ghost story. However, when the fact that Sean has been lying is revealed and one returns to the beginning to watch the film again, this movie crosses a lot of boundaries in regard to child sexuality and intergenerational sex that most American films refuse to come near. When Sean first approaches Anna, he says “I want you” followed by “Do not marry Joseph.” These lines are accredited to an adult Sean who possesses the boy. However, once the truth comes
out, these words represent the boy’s (sexual) desire for Anna and nullify the arguments made in the last two decades that say the child is asexual. In the following scene Joseph and Anna are attempting to have sex, but Anna can only stare at the ceiling with her mind on the boy. While she is not sure if the boy is really her husband, the fact that she is thinking about a child while having sex seems a bit perverse. In retrospect, the film shatters any notion of Hollywood heteronormativity by creating a (pre-pubescent) sexualized child and an adult who sexually fantasizes about him. This is a significant digression from the good/bad dichotomy of modern myth.

The child conducts himself with ulterior motives throughout the film: the moment he falls to his knees as if overcome with heartbreak when Anna tells him he is lying; kicking Joseph’s chair in order to annoy him; hugging Clifford when he arrives (at Anna’s request) to see whether or not Sean is telling the truth; all these seem natural actions of an adult Sean who happens to be stuck in a child’s body. However, when the truth is told, these actions seem much more sinister. Young Sean is not acting as a jealous husband; he’s acting as a sexually charged child.

The more jarring scenes are those that were overtly sexual to begin with. Anna picks Sean up from school (her standing, waiting for him in the schoolyard among children has its own disturbing quality when considering the truth) and takes him for ice cream. The ice cream shop lacks any significance except when one is aware that Sean is lying. American cultural products have created stereotypical characteristics of pedophiles and coercing their victims with candy, treats, or in this case, ice cream has become one of them. The hint at pedophilia is reiterated when thinking about the conversation on sex that occurs in this scene. Anna’s inquisition on how young Sean
will provide for her soon turns to: “How are you going to fulfill my needs?” There are two ways of reading Anna’s question: she truly believes that young Sean is her reincarnated husband or she has a vested interest in how the boy would deal with the sexual needs of a grown woman; either way, it is sexual tension between an adult and a child. Sean’s reply of “I know what you’re talking about” gives him some sexual knowledge not often afforded the asexual child in America. Knowing the truth, this scene makes Anna’s desire for young Sean to be her husband pedophilic and young Sean’s sexual knowledge far from innocent.

Therefore, the roles of the characters in the aggressor/victim dichotomy become completely ambivalent.

I would like to end this analysis of Birth with a deconstruction of the “much talked about” bathtub scene (Rooney, p. 44). Maclean’s called it “controversial […] but one of those crazy little cinematic landmarks” (Johnson, p. 52). Rolling Stone hastily referred to it as “not sexual” (Travers, p. 102). And Entertainment Weekly appeared to have misinterpreted the scene, writing: “When Kidman slithers into a bathtub with her young ‘husband’” it was only “to conjure creepy child-porn overtones” (Gleiberman, p. 59). In the scene young Sean voluntarily gets into the bath with Anna. It is not she who disrobes and gets in the tub with him. Perhaps Owen Gleiberman misreads this scene and this why he hated the film, since his interpretation frames Anna as an adult desiring a nude child. Clearly, Peter Travers of Rolling Stone is mistaken when he says the scene is “not sexual” because such a reading is also amiss. If we are to believe that
young Sean is a man stuck in a boy’s body when he disrobes and enters the tub with Anna, the scene is still sexual because the film has framed the elder Sean as a heterosexual man. Knowing now that Sean is just a boy turns the cultural myth of asexual children on its head. He desires Anna and enters the tub to see her nude, but also hopes to have sex with her. Retrospective knowledge has the same effect on the interpretation of Anna’s role in this scene as the previously mentioned scene in the ice cream shop. Either she believes Sean’s story and thus allows him to enter the tub because she only sees him as her dead husband or she has pedophilic tendencies. In our culture, looking at a nude child is considered wrong and to lust after a nude child – which the end of the film reveals is what Anna has done – is pederasty. The sexual tension and desire that appear when rereading *Birth* with the knowledge the ending provides allows this film to present a more complex representation of intergenerational sex not common in mainstream film.

The complexities of *Birth* do not fit into the mainstream mold. Sean, the child, is not the victim; Anna, the adult, is not the abuser. Both characters exist somewhere in between and it is perhaps this ambivalence that contributed to the film’s failure at the box office and to the fact that Jonathan Glazer has not made a film since. The film sexualizes the child American culture has been so intent on making an asexual being. It blurs the line between predator/prey and explains the actions of the adult in this child/adult sexual relationship as products of deception. This film does not reiterate society’s creation of the pure, innocent, and asexual child, nor does it mirror the cultural myth of molestation that has been so prolific in the last two decades. Because of this,
Birth is a rarity not only in American cinema, but also as media product of a culture that hesitates to give two sides to this modern narrative.

**Hard Candy: When the Kid Becomes the Predator**

Production of *Hard Candy* began soon after the independent production company Vulcan announced that it was going to make “a series of $1 million films” (Macaulay, ¶ 18). *Hard Candy* had some success at smaller film festivals and was picked up by Lions Gate for distribution. Like other Lions Gate films (*Saw* (2004) and *Grizzly Man* (2005)) *Hard Candy* had a polarizing effect, but as an independent film it brought up controversial subject matter and commented upon it in ways mainstream Hollywood is unable to do. In the film, the relationship between the predator and prey is far from what is commonly found. As a result, the dichotomy between victim/abuser is broken down to the point where it is hard to spot a sympathetic character.

The film begins with a screen shot of Thonggrrrl14’s chat room conversation with Lensman319 that includes numerous sexual innuendos, flirting, and eventually an agreement to meet in “RW;” the real world. Haley (Ellen Page) is ordering coffee and eating cake when Jeff (Patrick Wilson) walks in to greet her. During their conversation it is revealed that Haley is 14 and Jeff is 32. The flirting continues and the two agree to return to Jeff’s home that is adorned with pictures of adolescent models he has worked with as a professional photographer. After begging for Jeff to photograph her, Haley begins to strip, but Jeff passes out while he is shooting.

As Jeff sits strapped to an office chair it becomes clear that Haley is not the innocent victim of an Internet predator, but has set up the meeting in order to question Jeff about his pedophilic desires. Haley’s verbal abuse is intermingled with the
searching of Jeff’s apartment for “kiddie porn.” However, once she finds a photograph of missing teen Donna Maurer, she has the proof needed to punish Jeff. While Jeff is strapped to the dinner table, Haley prepares him for castration and as he pleads for her to stop, she continues to verbally/physically abuse him. His one chance to alleviate the situation is to call his ex-girlfriend, Janelle, and confess to her that he is a pedophile. Jeff cannot do it and Haley performs the castration. As she stitches him up, she scoffs “I wonder why they teach Girl Scouts things like selling cookies and camping. This is what’s really useful.”

In the climatic finale Jeff comes to grips with the person he is, stabbing holes in the various modeling pictures of teens around his home. He climbs to the roof where Haley is waiting. She makes a deal with him: if he admits to killing Donna and agrees to hang himself Haley will clean up the house and arrange it so that it looks like Jeff was simply too depressed by his situation to go on living. After he tells Haley that he did not kill Donna, but was there to watch, she retorts “Aaron [another one of Haley’s targets] told me you did it before he killed himself.” Jeff puts the noose around his neck and jumps off the roof.

From the title sequence of Hard Candy it is clear that nothing is as it seems. Along with the names of cast and crew, a red square moves in various directions across the screen. While the red box attempts to fit into other squares, rectangles, and corners, it is never able to do so; this foreshadows the rest of the film, in which neither Haley nor Jeff can be labeled as simply victim or abuser. Similar uncertainty is connoted during the online conversation as Haley sets up their meeting, but Jeff seems to hurry her along, both implicated in what is about to happen. Until the point where Jeff passes out,
there is continuous flirtation between both parties, but with a hint of stereotypical pedophile/child action and conversation: Jeff telling Haley “You look older than you are” and her commenting on the mature literature she is reading in order to seem older than her 14 years. She even comments on reading Jean Seberg’s biography and explains that the actress “slept with all the wrong people.” Jeff goes as far as buying her a t-shirt from the coffee shop as if bribing her to come back to his place. It works, but it is not that simple, considering that Haley gives Jeff a peek of her in her bra before putting the shirt on in the bathroom.

An important part of this opening sequence is the framing of Haley’s gender. She has a butch haircut, unpronounced breasts, and very little curvature. This connotes androgyny: Haley is neither boy nor girl, but somewhere in that prepubescent range where clear gender features are not yet defined. This look continues until the point in Jeff’s house at which she begins to strip for him and asks him to photograph her. She throws off her bright red hooded sweatshirt—which had previously made her the forbidden fruit and harkens back to Robin’s red coat in *The Woodsman*—and dances in her bra on the sofa. At this point Jeff passes out only to wake up with Haley hovering over him. Any androgynous element to Haley has vanished at this point. She has breasts, curves, and is wearing only a tube top with her bra straps noticeable, making her a sexual object presented for the audience and Jeff to look at. It is also at this point that Jeff could be seen as the victim. No longer is Haley sweet and child-like, but has become the “demented and delusional bitch” Variety’s Todd McCarthy describes in his review of the film (p. 32). Haley has not only become a sexual object, much different than the somewhat asexual child she was in the very beginning; she has turned the
tables and become the abuser. Jeff has the same ambivalence for the viewer. Clearly, he is interested in having sex with the underage Haley, but he is also being tortured.

There is an interesting segment during the middle of the film that adds to its polarizing effect: Haley’s search for Jeff’s “kiddie porn.” At this point the roles have been overly complicated and possibly reversed, allowing for possible identification with Jeff. Haley runs around the house, flipping mattresses, emptying cabinets, but finding nothing. The suspense of Haley’s search is reminiscent of the investigation sequence in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). After “Mrs. Bates” has killed Marion the audience comes to identify with Norman. As a result, one does not want the murder to be discovered by Milton Arbogast or Sam Loomis and the audience is overcome with suspense, especially the closer they get to Norman’s real secret. Similarly, it is possible to hope that Haley finds nothing while searching for evidence of Jeff’s transgressions. Such identification with a pedophile may explain why the film disgusted so many viewers. It is a difficult proposition when the director asks the audience to fill the shoes of an admitted pedophile. The fact that Jeff’s past (the combination to the safe is the date of his and Janelle’s first sexual experience) is what incriminates him seems to humanize him more as the film appears to be playing on the human flaw of holding onto the past –just as Anna was guilty of it in *Birth*. However, there is quick detachment and from this point the audience sits as outsiders watching.
the remaining conversations between two people who are not innocent bystanders, only monsters.

Many critics thought the castration scene was overdone, seeing it as exploitation. Rob Nelson of *The Village Voice* compared the film to other Lions Gate distributions: “in the spirit of *Hostel* and *The Devil’s Rejects*, a good half of this lurid two-handler is pure torture” (¶ 4); *People* called the film “a taut thriller” that “quickly goes slack” after the scene (p. 37); and *Variety* said it is “Destined to be called ‘the castration picture’” (McCarthy, p. 32). Considering the legislation that has been proposed (castration) and passed (chemical castration) that outlines ways of dealing with sex offenders, the scene has more than just shock value. Kincaid explains that in the past fifteen years many in California (where *Hard Candy* is set) were not happy with simply incarcerating convicted pedophiles. What resulted was a bill that allows offenders to choose between “weekly injections of Depo-Provera” which reduces “sexual urges drastically” and actual castration for “those most anxious to show they are not in denial” (Kincaid, p. 90). The fact that professional film critics were misreading this scene (and the film) shows the difficulty society has seeing two sides of the predator/prey story. The modern myth wants an either/or resolution, but in *Hard Candy* both the pedophile and his “victim” can be seen as monsters.

It is not important whether or not Jeff killed Donna Maurer. The fact that he was there was enough to incriminate him. However, there is something sinister about the way Haley leaves the scene: if she has not cleaned up the evidence of Jeff’s pathology, she is a liar; and even if she has cleared his name, as she dons the red sweatshirt once again and skips down the street, it is clear that she will continue her internet stalking.
There is no noble protagonist to cheer for or monstrous villain to decry. The child is far from asexual and the modern myth of molestation is deconstructed, obliterating the dichotomy between predator and prey.

Conclusion

Occasionally, our culture is able to produce commodities that challenge James Kincaid’s idea of our modern myth. Like *Lolita* before them, *Birth* and *Hard Candy* are able to confuse sexual relationships between child and adult. The children in these films are not the asexual beings Judith Levine defines and our culture wants to believe exists. These kids have ulterior motives that make them anything but innocent and far from asexual. However, these films are few and far between and when they are made, they do not reach the mainstream. *Birth* truly is an exception to the rule and Jonathan Glazer’s lack of work since its release only reiterates its rarity. Because of its subject matter, *Hard Candy* is one of the most provocative American films to be released in a long time. However, its widest theatrical release was on 152 screens and this came three weeks after its opening weekend on which the film appeared in two theatres. A lot of work must be done before this modern myth of child molestation is proven to be anything but reality. It appears that as long as our culture chooses to desexualize children and to refuse them any knowledge about sex other than what is provided by the media, society will continue to breed generations of eroticized children and anxiety-ridden adults.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS NEXT?

Future Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse in American Media

Through these examinations it is clear that contemporary American media has shifted away from a universal narrative about child sexual abuse towards more nuanced versions of the story. Like child sexuality as a whole, the child sexual abuser had remained in the shadows for decades. However, unlike the past three decades in which child sexuality has been provided a discourse and became the focus of American media, these examples shift the focus to the abuser rather than on the victim. This remains the case even in media like Dateline NBC’s “To Catch a Predator” and Sin City: mainstream products that continue to frame the predator as monstrous, superhuman, and nearly indestructible. Little Children and The Woodsman take the next step in recognition as they frame the abuser as human rather than monstrous. It is clear that the men in these films struggle to control the desires that have made them outcasts.

Unlike most American media leading up to this movement in representations of child sexual abuse – including the media from Chapter 2 – these two films give the abuser a voice and ask audiences to recognize his plight. The films of Chapter 4, Birth and Hard Candy, take the sexually aware child of films like Lolita (1962) and the popular music of bands like The Rolling Stones and mix him/her with the master narrative of child molestation. As a result, these two films create relationships in which the dichotomy between good/bad collapses. The acts of the adults are unacceptable, but when they are coupled with the sexual agency and ulterior motives of the minors, the audience is left searching for a character with whom to identify.
Recent independent and foreign films continue to complicate the relationship between good and evil children. Like *The Omen* and *The Exorcist*, *Let the Right One In* (2008) is a Swedish film about a child who deviates from the pure and innocent norm. It presents an erotic and proactive child, Eli (Lena Leandersson), an ancient vampire housed in the body of a 12-year-old girl who must feed on the blood of humans in order to survive. However, Eli differs from her demonic predecessors because unlike those children, another being does not possess her. Also, as cinema has long eroticized the vampire, it is clear that Eli possesses an overt and powerful sexuality. *Towelhead* (2008) is similar in its treatment of sexually proactive children as Jasira (Summer Bashil) is a sexually active teenager conscious of her changing body and her sexual desires. However, unlike *Let the Right One In*, which uses the horror genre to mask overt comments on child sexuality and abuse, *Towelhead* references both rather overtly. Jasira discovers her own desires and willingly pleases herself, but throughout the film her developing sexuality is taken advantage of by her boyfriend, Thomas (Eugene Jones) and older neighbor, Travis (Aaron Eckhart). While the relationship with the boyfriend is hackneyed in its comment on teenage relationships (the boyfriend coercing the girlfriend into sex), the latter relationship is much more complicated. Jasira appears to have an innocent crush on Travis that he uses to his advantage when they first have sex. The initial act appears confusing for Jasira and it is unclear whether she is a willing participant. However, when Travis forces Jasira to have sex with him a second time it is clear that she is totally against it. Complicating the idea of abuse as well as the notion of child sexuality makes *Towelhead* a rather contemporary film. Unfortunately, like *Let the Right One In*, it also failed to receive significant mainstream
attention, therefore keeping its more complex ruminations on child sexuality ghettoized and only available to smaller, more proactive crowds.

*Doubt* (2008) and *The Reader* (2008) are two recent films that fall into the category of semi-independent films as they feature A-list actors, received significant award season attention, and opened in more theatres than most independent pictures. Both of these films were able to reach wider audiences with their complex comments on child sexual abuse and child sexuality. A significant amount of *Doubt* leads viewers to believe that child molestation has occurred as Father Flynn (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) is accused of abusing a young boy. However, it is later intuited that the boy may be gay and that his relationship with Father Flynn was consensual. The film ends with Father Flynn leaving his parish after the head nun, Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep), coaxes him into moving on. *The Reader* centers on the love affair between a teenage boy, Michael (David Kross) and an older woman, Hannah (Kate Winslet). However, this affair serves mainly as a back-story to Hannah’s trial for war crimes while serving as a Nazi officer. As popular and critically acclaimed as *Doubt* and *The Reader* have been, both of these films still refuse to make novel comments on proactive minors and their sexual relationships with adults or thoroughly complicate the gender issue involved with child/adult sexual relations. Instead, they end in a gray area where audiences are left to conduct their own interpretations of intergenerational sex.

There have also been some recent documentaries that have tackled the uncertainty of the child sexual abuse narrative. *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired* (2008) investigates the trial of famed director Roman Polanski who fled to France in 1977 after being charged with having unlawful sex with a 13-year-old girl. The film
complicates the master narrative of child sexual abuse by explaining that Polanski did not flee because of the charges but because he became impatient with the judge presiding over the case. As the judge was considering another sentencing change, Polanski flew to France and has not returned since. The story is also complicated as the victim, now an adult, explains her own anger in the continual hyperbole and admits that she has forgiven Polanski for anything that may have happened. *Witch Hunt* (2008) follows a California district attorney who spent most of his 25-year career sending people to jail for child sexual abuse. As the documentary discloses, after appeals, many of these “predators” –who were often parents of the victims– were exonerated. These documentaries are able to exhume tales of misinformation as they provide clear accounts of mass hysteria in situations where society has turned a blind eye to child sexual abuse by simply assuming that the stories are true. Unfortunately, the documentary often remains as ghettoized as the independent film and other unconventional media. Those taking the time to watch these films are often inherently open-minded and those who would possibly be enlightened by disparate opinions rarely have access to them.

While all of these films are distinctly different, they do come together and reiterate the fluidity of child sexual abuse when considering it as a social construction. Society is left with very different words that all connote the same monstrous act of abuse upon a child. It is not clear whether the peripheral and liberal ideologies found in some of these products will take over the ideas reiterated in other, more mainstream media. Independent films and progressive media suggest that the narrative of child sexual abuse may need an overhaul, but mainstream media ranging from Nancy
Grace’s nightly rants about endangered children on CNN to big-budget Hollywood films like *Gone Baby Gone* (2007) continue to demonize the abuser. When he does come out from the shadows he is more monster than human. It remains unclear which direction the pendulum will shift in the future, but it is for certain that as long as society continues to ignore the existence of child sexuality, the narrative of child sexual abuse will remain an integral part of American culture and its media.
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