

# Voting Horrors: Youthful, Monstrous, and Worrying Agency in American Films

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Damien Thorn, the devil's spawn in 1976's *The Omen*, wreaks havoc on the adults with whom he comes into contact. His supernatural powers allow him to control, injure, or kill adults who challenge him and ultimately overthrow established order. Similarly, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) chronicles a monstrous youth from birth, through a mass murder via bow and arrow at his high school, to his anxieties about being transferred to an adult prison on his eighteenth birthday. Kevin consistently torments his mother and murders his sister, father, and schoolmates, destroying institutions of education and family. In creating the conditions for patricide or performing it, Damien and Kevin render powerless the symbolic head of the household and family. Tales such as these are common throughout the 1970s and 2010s even if not the *most* popular cinematic feature. Even when monstrous youth recede further into the background of American cinema, they never disappear entirely. Children and teens, monstrous youth, act out, often in violent ways, against structures and embodiments of power.

This essay engages figures of young monstrosity, collectively referred to as monstrous youth and argues that they emerge in American cinema in times of vast uncertainty about youth agency in the American political process. The young monsters engaged in this essay resonate with these anxieties by exercising too much or too little agency. What I am calling young monsters have been analyzed through their connections to guilt (Kord), in relation to various stages of child development (Bohlmann and Moreland), as sites of projections for queer subjectivities (Scahill), and as confirmations of the innocence of children (Renner). Tracing young monsters across the recent and distant past can help us understand cultural responses to anxiety about youth agency in our own time.

This essay argues that agency anxiety defines the resonance between political uncertainty about youth voters and film depictions of monstrous youth. I pursue this argument by first explicating the figure of the young monster and establishing

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the similarity in contexts between the 1970s and 2010s in relation to youth political agency. After situating the approach to resonance, this essay then traces three categories of agency anxiety across six films: *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), *Insidious* (2010), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), and *Sinister* (2012).

### Theorizing Young Monsters

Figures of young monsters are popular in horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976), but monstrous youth emerge in other genres as well. For example, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) also exhibits monstrous youth. While monstrous youth remain present in the 1980s through the 2000s, they resurfaced widely in the 2010s. By comparing films from the 1970s with the more recent films *Insidious* (2010), *Sinister* (2012) and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), this essay analyzes resonant political features of monstrous youth. Although other films could fit into this analysis such as *Logan's Run* (1976), *It's Alive* (1974), *Rock 'n' Roll School* (1979), *Hard Candy* (2005), and *The Witch* (2015), focusing on the six films provides a balance between generalized claims and specific details. That said, tracking tendencies across periods sacrifices attention to individual films in favor of representative film fragments.

American film turns to monstrous youth because of their political potential and the collective danger they pose to societies. This turn follows concerns about expanding political agency and cultural authority. Agency, according to Jeffrey P. Mehlretter Drury, is “the *capacity for* action, discourse, invention, response, and resonance” (41, italics in original). Agency, in other words, is not any particular action, but the ability to act and make choices for oneself. When young people begin to wield their agency in the political realm, American films respond with the patterns analyzed in this essay.

While films about monstrous youth speak to many social anxieties, this essay centers on how a particular facet of personal and political agency, voting, threatens American institutions. There is a critical mass of young monsters that display an uneasy relationship to youth political agency. Therefore, this essay argues that monstrous youth in the 1970s and 2010s resonate with attitudes toward young people exercising their agency related to voting. This resonance means that people with apprehension about youth voters saw their fears and

worries on the big screen. Their fears were confirmed. Children, unable to exercise agency proportionally, were to be feared. In this way, resonances such as the ones examined in this essay are powerful tools of the status quo and resistant to change as they reach wide swaths of the American population and reinforce their fears.

## Youth Voting in the United States of America

Both the 1970s and 2010s were periods of upheaval and fallout from massive surges in youth voting. The 1970s saw the swift adoption of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment while the 2010s saw the aftermath of the Obama election, which was carried in part by large numbers of youth voters (Lipka and Wiedeman). This section argues that these two periods in American history share anxieties about youth voters and produced films that resonated with that contextual element. Therefore, reading the 1970s and 2010s together is productive for examining the anxieties around youth voting.

The 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States of America's Constitution lowered the minimum voting age in the country to eighteen in 1971. While the Amendment had wide support and enjoyed the shortest ratification period in United States history, some still harbored concerns about the effects of allowing younger people to vote (Aloi, 286; Rowley). A 1974 poll showed that only one-third of respondents thought the schools prepared young people to "vote intelligently" while 16% thought they were poorly prepared and 18% either did not know or had no answer (Charles F. Kettering Foundation). Change was happening in the United States' voting practices in the early 1970s.

In his book detailing the process of securing the youth vote, Wendell W. Cultice describes an address Richard Nixon gave at the University of Nebraska where he emphasized the agency and power the young people were struggling to garner. He also made an emphatic appeal to "try out 'the system'" (175). Cultice also noted that one fear about extending the vote was the "chance of confusion, delay, and fraud on election day" (178). Another fear given a brief mention in Cultice's book is that "Adults in some university towns feared that if the Supreme Court cut the residency requirements to thirty days in local as well as federal elections, students could take control of the towns" (192). An article by Dan Kubiak published after the ratification of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment also listed a variety

of predictions, many of which would read as good or bad depending on a reader's confidence in the newly enfranchised voters. Anxieties permeated the country about what these dramatic changes would bring.

These 11 million new voters were also relatively unpredictable and unintelligible to the political structure making them difficult to predict and manage (Scott). They largely rejected party labels and thus eschewed easy tagging and predictability (Cultice, 217). Cultice provides an additional summary of concerns about passing the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment including a distaste for tying voting to the age of participation in war, that there would be no increase in feelings of belonging in society, and the need to work and provide for a family before voting (228). What is left unsaid in all this is how those uncertainties tied into other concerns about youths in the voting booths. What were they actually going to vote for?

The potential for dramatic change in "business as usual" was frightening for a significant amount of people. Thomas H. Neale lists lack of maturity, that those under twenty-one are mostly not legally responsible for their actions, and that a flood of college voters could overwhelm residents in college areas taking decisions away from more permanent residents among the arguments against the amendment. Underlying these arguments is a tacit concern about the controllability and predictability of young people as well as a fear of the power they might be able to wield if given the opportunity and what effect that power might have. For example, William G. Carleton wrote an article titled, "Teen Voting Would Accelerate Undesirable Changes in the Democratic Process," in opposition to the Twenty-Sixth Amendment stressing the impressionability and uneducated status of young people. Both of these slights point toward an anxiety about youths' personal agency. Yet, the slogan "Old Enough to Fight, Old Enough to Vote," was a compelling one as it focused on the sacrifices made by a generation of young men and their families (Williams, J.). The change in voting age was literally a bestowing of political agency upon young people and was reflected in American films through the figure of the young monster. Additionally, the practices of the film industry tie the 1970s and 2010s together.

Films in and around the 1970s are being remade in and around the 2010s. *The Omen* was remade shot for shot in a gimmick release on June 6, 2006 (6-6-06), reflecting the "devil's number." Films were remade without a specific gimmick of a release date as well. For example, *Carrie* (1976) was remade in 2013, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) was remade as a television mini-series in 2014, *I Spit on*

*Your Grave* (1978) (itself a remake) was remade in 2010 with sequels *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (2013), and *I Spit on Your Grave III: Vengeance is Mine* (2015). Finally, *The Exorcist* has reappeared as a Fox television series and Peter Blatty's director's cut of *The Exorcist III* (1990) was released as *Legion* in 2016. These are in addition to those franchises from the 1970s who have a particularly potent staying power such as *Halloween* (ten films from 1978-2009 and another scheduled for 2018), and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (eight films from 1974-2017). In sum, the decades of the 1970s and the 2010s have much to inform us about one another especially related to anxieties about youth in horror films. This essay explores the horrors that emerged during those years through figures of young monsters to better understand how popular culture can repackage and represent anxieties thereby confirming their existence as anxieties that are "reasonable" or "worthwhile" to have.

Anxieties and fears of the political agency of young people are paradoxical. On one hand, worries about the sudden influx of new and inexperienced voters exerting their will on a system that may not be able to handle the sudden shift permeate both discourses of the 1970s and the 2010s. On the other hand, fears that these inexperienced voters might get tricked, fooled, or confused into voting a way that either they might not normally vote or that any individual or group of voters might see as detrimental to the system, country, and general well-being also existed reflecting anxieties that young voters lack the agency to control and decide for themselves.

The worries are illustrated by the same 1974 poll referenced above that showed only one-third of respondents thought the schools prepared young people to "vote intelligently" while 16% thought they were poorly prepared (Charles F. Kettering Foundation). While the number of people thinking youths were poorly prepared was small, it still amounts to a sizable portion, especially considering how quickly this amendment was ratified and the overwhelming favorability it garnered.

The official acknowledgment of political agency was welcomed by the newly inducted electorate. Young people were hungry for political action. Dan Cassino and Yasemin Besen-Cassino begin their book describing this eagerness writing, "In 1968, people under the age of twenty-five were more interested in politics than their parents, knew more about it than older people, and were so politically engaged that the Gallup poll had to add another category, 'radical,' to their list of political views to try and measure the strength of the youth movement" (9).

Overall, voting was an important, and yet understudied context into which monstrous youth emerged in the 1970s and re-emerged in the 2010s.

Barack Obama rode a wave of youth voters to victory in the 2008 election and again in 2012. News headlines such as 2008's "Obama's Youth Vote Triumph" and "The Year of the Youth Vote," both from *Time's* Von Drehle and 2012's "Study: Youth Vote was Decisive" from *Politico's* Robillard were common occurrences in the wake of the elections. These headlines point to the fact that young voters turned out to vote in percentages like they had not done since first being enfranchised nearly forty years ago. These young voters were overwhelmingly in favor of Barack Obama by nearly a 2-1 ratio (Lipka and Wiedeman). Lipka and Wiedeman claim that the youth vote may have flipped some states which would have otherwise voted for Republican John McCain.

While the specific mechanism through which Obama was able to capture those votes is debatable whether it is social media (O'Hara), music (Forman), or generic internet usage among the electorate that exposed them to Obama's message (Garcia-Castañon, Rank, and Barreto), youth voters connected with Obama and turned out to vote for him in record numbers. Compared with older generations who voted in larger part for McCain, and were untrusting of Obama, young voters exercised their political power and rewarded a candidate and campaign who could tap into their desires and mobilize them.

The surge in youth voting for Obama was unmatched at any point in the history of the United States except the first election after lowering the voting age to eighteen. This created a similar context where the uncertainty and unpredictability of the youth vote and their decisions were put under the spotlight. The voting context of 2008 and 2012 encapsulated in what I have been terming the 2010s is similar to that of the 1970s because of the importance of the youth vote and the uncertainty that feature of the political landscape brings with it.

## Film, Youth, and Their Resonances

Films, especially horror, reflect the anxieties of their cultures and times. Scholars such as Carol J. Clover, David J. Skal, Bryan L. Ott and Diane Marie Keeling, and Claire Sisco King examine how film responds to the world and creates responses within the world through a variety of theoretical approaches. However,

these scholars all view film as providing insight into understanding the workings of culture and how culture provides necessary context for understanding films.

This essay draws on the theory of resonance developed by Kendall Phillips that traces connections between the actual and screen world, however large or small that connection might be. In other words, people go see films at particular cultural and historical moments. Those moments are a factor in a film's success or failure with critics, financially, and in public memory. Therefore, the films selected for this essay all enjoyed success in at least one of those areas. Phillips describes the process connecting film and wider culture and lived experiences as "resonance," a way to connect to cultural patterns that ring "somehow 'true'" for audiences (5). This truth is in part a confirmation of fears that this essay briefly addresses directly below. It is also that the audience feels, on some level, that the screen depicts the anxieties that they feel in their lives (5). However, this allegory-like connection is not enough for horror or other shocking films (6). Kord makes a similar argument when she claims that horror films primarily focus on creating guilt in an audience based on violations of preconceived social norms (6). Film, especially horror and other body genres as defined by Linda Williams, works upon the body to create affects, sensations, and feelings (Aldana-Reyes). While this essay takes these authors as foundational, it also expands their work to place two contexts in the same reading. This approach adds a diachronic lens that further exposes the patterns of political life through popular culture. Engaging the 1970s alongside and against the 2010s creates a productive friction that brings light to other aspects of the films that may not otherwise be visible.

Overall, this essay takes up these notions of how films connect to the world and explores their relationship through a lens of resonance to argue that they responded to and fueled anxieties about the agency of American youths. By operationalizing resonance in this way, this essay understands film as responding to the world and in turn offering a world and sets of relations back that can be realized more or less fully. These films did more than simply react to a cultural moment. They helped to create cultural moments. For instance, an unease about youth voting existed in America. Films began to tap into that unease. By so doing, the films presented back to audiences a world where youth agency, when not *just right*, was horrifying. This then fed back into fears outside the theater and in part shaped what was politically possible and expedient regarding youths in America. Even though these films may not have set out to create a work that resonated with voting anxieties (or maybe they did, we can never be sure even if everyone

involved in its creation denies it), they responded to a context and added to it in some ways. Therefore, while these films might serve as a site to work through anxieties for some audiences, they are just as, if not more likely, to confirm and heighten already extant unease.

The remainder of this essay turns then to one of these elements, youth voting, and analyzes how it resonates with some of the films released during the 1970s and the 2010s. These films contributed to the concerns around the voting powers of young people by confirming that youths are indeed dangerous, unpredictable, insufficiently educated, and seeking change on a drastic level.

### Too Much, Not Enough of Youth Political Agency

*The Exorcist* and *The Omen* most obviously display the two central fears about what might happen to young voters: they are manipulated by someone else (Regan and Pazuzu) or they seek a revolution and to tear the system apart (Damien). In both films, the youth of new voters, 18-20 instead of 21 and older, is highlighted by portraying them as literal children who resonate with anxieties about these younger, potentially more radical, and inexperienced voters. This essay, in trying to identify patterns across a broad range of films from two periods, must select representative examples from each of the films analyzed. This produces a more diffuse reading than is traditional, but it allows for the comparison of the two periods in a meaningful way centered on how monstrous youth emerged as powerful and frightening figures.

#### *Threatening the System*

In *The Omen*, Damien seeks to destroy the dominant order altogether. Although he uses the tools of democracy (as evidenced more in the sequel films), he seeks to rule the world himself thus demolishing democratic and republican rule in favor of his own dictatorship. Once the focus is placed on Damien, concerns for democratic and systemic stability present themselves readily. Such concerns are also heightened by the Civil Rights Movement, which occurred immediately prior to the push for youth voting. Damien resonates with concerns that extending the vote to young people, who may be too idealistic or unrealistic in the potential for their candidates or preferred changes, might destabilize the system enough to send the whole thing awry.



Damien spends the entire film devastating those around him through nefarious means. While Damien seldom acts himself, he operates by controlling others and having his minions do his dirty work. The one time he does get directly involved is when he knocks his mother over the railing where she then falls but does not die. Damien's nurse later kills his mother. Damien becomes much more directly sinister in the sequels *Damien: Omen II* where he is a young teenager at military school and *The Final Conflict* where he becomes the American Ambassador to Great Britain. In each of these films, Damien seeks to tear down established institutions and replace them with his own idealized version of ruling.

Damien displays far too much agency. Children and young people are not supposed to be capable of establishing a following like that, especially not of adults such as his nanny. Damien demonstrates the power that older voters were fearful of in the young voters after the passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment. If young voters wielded their agency they could take over, especially at the more local levels of government and the districts near universities that some considered extremely vulnerable to the young voters who came in droves with the beginning of every semester.

These fears about the agency of young voters and films that engaged that anxiety also appeared in the aftermath of the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. Kevin attacks his school and undermines that symbol of control and socialization in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* in addition to committing patricide and soricide and tormenting his mother throughout his whole life. This behavior marks him as monstrous according to Colin Yeo's definition of monstrosity as patricidal and unnatural.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the film follows the development of a young boy who is, by seemingly any definition, monstrous in his actions despite lacking any demonic powers. As an infant, he cries all the time, especially at his mother. As a toddler, he refuses to speak and defecates in his diaper specifically to spite his mother well past the average age for wearing them. In his teenaged years, Kevin sets a trap in his school where he kills numerous people with a bow and arrow after murdering his sister and father in the same way. Kevin is, at every stage of childhood and youth development, monstrously evil. Importantly, Kevin pursues monstrous deeds with decided and pointed agency. His actions are premeditatedly monstrous. He chooses to act. He poops himself with a purpose—making his mother clean him up. He kills people with a well-thought-out plan and commits the acts with cold calculation. As a young child, he purposefully splatters

paint all over the maps his mother used as wallpaper to decorate her study. It is no accident, no slip, no coincidence. Kevin acts to upset his mother's life and cause her misery.

Unlike Damien, Kevin carries out his dangerous actions personally. He violates norms of cleanliness by soiling himself far longer than most children are in diapers, he continues masturbating when his mother walks in on him, even making eye contact with her, and he eventually commits several murders. These murders occur near their home and in the school, two supposedly safe areas. By upending supposedly fundamental institutions of American life, family and schools, Kevin resonates with the anxieties felt by some Americans in the aftermath of a youth voting surge for a senator relatively new to national politics. Suddenly, young people exerted their agency in large numbers to elect a President whose ideas seemed radical, especially to those who have historically held power in government and social institutions. These youth votes were crucial to Obama's election and provided a narrative for his election. Kevin confirmed the anxieties of those who felt them by putting youth violence and the destruction of institutions on the screen.

In summary, one way that anxieties over youth voting resonated in film of the 1970s and 2010s is through youths who displayed too much agency. In film, youth sought to destroy existing symbols and institutions. Damien exerted his agency in forcing others to do his bidding and Kevin violated and murdered under his own power. The recognition of the agency of youths is a fraught exercise for some Americans. When confronted with young people wielding their agency, *The Omen* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* showed us that fear in the form of overly agentic youths. However, youths having too much agency is not the only anxiety displayed by films of these periods related to young people voting.

#### *Manipulated by Others*

In addition to youth who display too much agency and are thus dangerous, anxieties about youth voters who do not display enough agency also permeated films in these two periods. Despite gaining the vote, anxieties about young people's competence in actively sorting through political problems persisted and were resonant with images in film. These characters fell under the control of others and displayed an overall lack of agency or control over their own actions. For example, Regan McNeil in *The Exorcist* plays with a Ouija board. She tells her mother she knows how to use it and plays with it alone, apart from Captain Howdy the spirit, often. In playing with forces beyond her comprehension,

understanding, and control, Regan becomes susceptible to the influence of the demon that eventually causes suffering and sometimes death to her and those around her.

Regan, who has fallen into the web of deceit and lies demonstrates the fear that young people may not be able to logically or adequately parse the political world. This gives new light to Father Merrin's statement to Father Karras in *The Exorcist* that "He is a liar. The demon is a liar. He will lie to confuse us. But he will also mix lies with the truth to attack us. The attack is psychological, Damien, and powerful. So don't listen to him. Remember that - do not listen." While in the film, the referent is the demon possessing Regan, it could refer anyone who might seek to sway young voters: campaigns, friends, and fringe aspects alike, especially for an audience who already held those concerns. Regan must be rescued from these dangerous elements of society or the supernatural by the legitimated power of the Church and its representatives. Regan is eventually brought safely back into the fold and can thus participate "properly" in democracy, that is, in ways sanctioned by the dominant parties.

These features of a lack of proper agency in youths arose again in the wake of Obama's election to confirm the anxieties felt by those worried that young voters were used or tricked. In 2010, Dalton from *Insidious* places his family in danger because he engages with forces he does not understand, and he must be rescued by his father who can, for only a moment, reassert "traditional" order and authority. Dalton is also at risk of being taken over by another entity. His body could be taken over while he is traveling (the film's term for his spirit leaving his body behind and "traveling" in the spirit world), that is, not on guard.

While *Insidious's* main monstrous youth Dalton is not a villain but primarily a victim, he nonetheless maintains the designation of monstrous youth because of the harm his actions cause. He sets in motion the whole film's narrative arc when he "travels" via detaching his spirit from his body. Dalton has some level of control over this event and even must use it to rescue his father in the sequel *Insidious II* (2013) who gets trapped at the end of the first film while rescuing his son. Dalton travels into the Further, a realm with which he is unfamiliar and does not fully understand. This has significant ramifications for Dalton as well as those around him who suffer because of his actions.

Dalton, as the main young character in the films, leaves himself open to possession and control by another. Even though it is his father that is eventually possessed (by a spirit that has followed him since he was a child), it is Dalton's

vulnerability to tricks and others and lack of knowledge about the things he engages that brings the danger to him and his family.

*Anxieties Synthesized*

In the films dealt with so far, the two aspects of youth agency (too much and not enough) have been separated. In the last two films this essay takes up, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Sinister* they find a synthesis and are presented in the same film. Thomas H. Neale describes the synthesis of anxieties above when he lists the arguments against the Twenty-Sixth Amendment. Young people are both too capable and therefore could do serious damage to extant structures and not capable enough in that they might be more easily tricked into doing something dangerous with their newfound voting powers.

*A Clockwork Orange* portrays youth running amok and resisting institutions and traditions. In an early scene where the group assaults a homeless man he says, “it’s a stinking world because it lets the young get onto the old” succinctly demonstrating the dangers of youth wielding agency. The 1970s were a transition moment toward a younger bloc of voters even though their participation has fallen dramatically since then from over half to around a third of eligible votes cast (“The 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment;” Cultice 217-9).

*A Clockwork Orange* follows Alex, a violent teenager, as he commits crimes, gets caught, is subjected to a new treatment, and endures the fallout. Alex chooses to act in violent ways repeatedly and the end of the film seems to imply that the treatment has failed and he will return to his violent ways. On one hand, the violence Alex demonstrates, especially early in the film such as assault, home invasion, and rape, resonates with fears that youth have too much agency and could destabilize the system of governance and order by overthrowing it. Like Damien and Kevin, Alex acts dangerously and causes harm to those around him when left to make his own decisions. This resonates with the anxieties of those who fear youths exercising their political agency through the voting booth to enact radical change.

On the other hand, Alex is conditioned to be sick at the sight of violence later in the film showing he can be controlled. Although the film depicts more of a conditioning than a manipulation, the theory of resonance discussed above posits that even a vague ringing true can be meaningful between the lived world of an audience and the world on screen. The film shows a young adult being controlled by both the system, when he is imprisoned, and by scientists and doctors during the treatment. *A Clockwork Orange*, through the character of Alex, portrays

youths as wildly unpredictable and subject to both rampant destruction and to control by others, thus confirming the anxieties about granting them the right to vote.

A similar pattern emerged in 2012's *Sinister*. Ashley, the daughter turned monster in *Sinister*, kills the symbol of authority in her family along with the rest of them while she is under the influence of the demon Bughuul. *Sinister* thus offers a confluence where both kinds of fears meet. Young people can be unduly influenced, perhaps even controlled, and their power can be used to tear down and destroy the system as it currently stands. Ashley binds Ellison, her father, after drugging his drink and murders him and the rest of her family with an axe before smearing their blood on the walls.

Ashley resonates with both concerns of too little and too much agency similarly to Alex. Since Ashley's only sustained screen time is at the conclusion of the film, she is a difficult character on whom to offer a sustained reading. However, she clearly demonstrates both poles of youth agency. At times, she is influenced to an unclear degree by the demon resonating with the fear that youth voters are too easily manipulated. She turns from a shy girl at the beginning of the film to a murderous child at the end. The only impetus for this radical shift is the demon who follows her once her family moves into the house. At the end of the film, Ashley is literally carried away by Bughuul to become one of the children who live with him and haunt other children who move into the house.

At other times in the film, Ashley appears to act with much more agency. She appears to drug her family and murder them under her own agency. She does it for the demon certainly, but *she* appears to be the one acting. This reading is given additional credence in the sequel *Sinister 2* when we see the abducted children hide from the demon indicating they serve him but are not completely under his control. Children drug, restrain, and kill their families in the service of Bughuul, but under their own agency. *Sinister* presents audiences with youths who are paradoxically displaying too little agency, as evidenced through their being manipulated, and too much agency, as evidenced by their grisly actions.

These films take both forms of anxiety, that youth voters will or did demonstrate too much agency and that they will not assert their own agency enough, and places them into a tension in the same character. Alex and Ashley both act dangerously and of their own volition while also clearly being controlled or influenced by other actors. These paradoxical fears come together in the same film rather than exist together in different films because the anxieties with which

they resonate are not separate. The fear is of the unknown power and consequences of the actions of many young people acting together in voting booths across the country.

Overall, this essay has argued that when youth agency displays itself through voting, film turns to depictions of young monsters to confirm the paradoxical anxieties of those voters being either too agential and likely to overthrow entrenched practices or lacking in agency and likely to be duped or manipulated. This feature of American cinema has not yet fully dissipated and yet it seems as though it might also receive a jolt from massive political actions undertaken by youths in resistance to President Trump and the early effectiveness of the student survivors of Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting in organizing against gun violence (Rabin and Vassolo; Jamison, Heim, Aratani, and Lang). Youths can exercise energetic, empowered, and effective political agency. When this agency is directed at change, American film tends to respond to the anxieties provoked in those entrenched in the established order by depicting young monsters.

To conclude, this essay offers three implications from this analysis. First, by refocusing critical attention on the child and assuming those characters can display agency, young monsters emerged as powerful critical artifacts to analyze that can break free of the bounds of dominant characters. Second, this analysis demonstrates the importance of accounting for democratic and governmental power even in the face of smaller family drama and larger apocalyptic struggles. Even the most fantastical films emerge from a particular contextual reality. Third, reading time periods against and across one another can result in surprising and enlightening findings. These two periods, both of which experienced shifts in voting behaviors among young people also resonated with one another in the young monsters present in the cinema.

Karen J. Renner offers a twist ending for her book *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* saying that there is no evil child. Each instantiation is an effort to reassert the innocence of children. This is similar to an assertion made by Kathy Merlock Jackson that “children who act like monsters are not fully guilty; further exploration reveals that their behavior is not really their fault” (137). That, however, is only part of the story, and it evaporates agency from the young monster in question. Once the characters identify and cure or purify the evil child it can serve that function. But for the majority of the film audiences stare at something, someone, monstrous. Even though innocence might lie beneath the

monstrosity wreaking havoc, there is still havoc being wrought and the innocence might be lying in wait or a lie altogether.

There are monstrous youth. The films analyzed in this essay show that they exist. They cause trouble and they do so because “we” do not understand them and do not know what they will do next. These films confirm the presence of monsters, but not because they are inherently monstrous, but because dominant factions, the old guard, those in power do not understand them and are fearful of what their power can do if youth can only harness it. When youth show their political power, they create cultural anxieties around the potentials in shifting power. These paradoxical anxieties orbit two poles, youth having too much agency and youth not having enough agency to ward off manipulation, sometimes at the same time. Some popular culture films resonate with these anxieties and display monstrous children to confirm the fears of a wary, even if eager, culture. This confirmation steadies resistance to youth political agency by creating clearly demarcated monsters.

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