



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Disturbing Child in Cinema: A Discussion of Agency and Ambiguity

Dekker, Thijs

Citation

Dekker, T. (2023). *The Disturbing Child in Cinema: A Discussion of Agency and Ambiguity*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3641776>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Disturbing Child in Cinema: A Discussion of Agency and Ambiguity

Thijs Dekker

S2192330

Film and Photographic Studies

Julian Ross

INHOUDSOPGAVE

The Evil Child and the Social Construction of Childhood	3
Chapter 1 – The White Ribbon	11
Agency	11
Introduction to the film	12
Ambiguous children in The White Ribbon	14
Children's agency as curiousness	15
The risk society	20
Risk Society and The White Ribbon	22
Chapter 2 – <i>Birth</i>	27
Sean's ambiguity	28
Agency and narration	30
Narrative and grief in Birth	33
Agency and events	35
Conclusion	40
Bibliography	42

Filmography

44

THE EVIL CHILD AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD

“The twins” in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980) could be seen as one of the most iconic evil children who have ever graced the silver screen. Their presence on screen has become one of the most recognizable examples of cinematic horror, deeply rooting itself in classic horror iconography while simultaneously contributing to the idea and presentation of the evil child in horror fiction. We encounter Kubrick’s iconic youngsters when Danny is riding his tricycle through the empty halls of the Overlook Hotel. After he turns around one of the building’s many corners both Danny and the viewer come to a screeching halt. For at the end of the hall stand the twins: two identical young girls dressed in old fashioned clothes posing in a deadpan way. They urge Danny to come and “play” with them and while he looks upon terrified, images of the twins’ horrific deaths burst through the screen for Danny and the viewer to behold. Now we often think that there is a dichotomy in this scene between one innocent child and two evil children. The audience sides with innocent Danny who looks at the malevolent twins from a distance, who are framed as the object of our gaze. But once the twins have disappeared the tension doesn’t disappear with them but still lingers around Danny. There is something unsettling and uncomfortable about his interaction with his imaginary friend Tony. His crooked voice and total immersion paired with a confrontational close-up question Danny’s innocent nature and make him a little disturbing even. There is a confrontation in this scene between two different kinds of children in film: two evil children clash with one disturbing child.

The former of these child archetypes dates back all the way to films like *The Bad Seed* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1956) and *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, 1960). Ever since its emergence in the 1950’s, the evil child has become a popular and a familiar figure in horror cinema. Films like *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) and *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979) eventually cemented the evil child as a popular cultural phenomenon. The effectiveness of the evil child can primarily be attributed to the transgression of our conceptions of children. Children are often seen as vulnerable and non-threatening, so their malevolent role in horror cinema both surprises and excites us. And these mechanisms of the evil child have been thoroughly discussed in academic circles. Karen J Renner’s book *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* and Dominic Lennard’s book *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film* being the most significant entries into the

discussion. But where the evil child is a well-established figure, both in cinematic representations as well as in academic discussions, the other child figure, exemplified by Danny and which we could call disturbing, is much less familiar to us. It becomes interesting to more closely examine the disturbing child figure not only because there is little written about it but also since the evil child convention is fraught with problematic ideological conceptions about childhood. Which raises the question whether the disturbing child might offer some resilience to this problematic conception.

Upon first glance the evil child in horror cinema might be seen as a representation of children that is about empowerment. Both presently and historically children have always had to accept their subordinate role to adults. The evil child could then be seen as figure who dramatically turns this hierarchy around and exercises power over the adult. For evil children are frequently portrayed harming, injuring or even killing adults in horror cinema. This interpretation of evil children as being empowering seems very much to align with Robin Wood's famous assertion that in the horror film "normality is threatened by the monster" (14). Wood saw the horror film as a site where forms of repression come to the surface to challenge the status quo. The evil child could then be read as an embodiment of this repression to confront us with children's low hierarchical position in society. But upon further inspection the horror trope of the evil child is actually a lot more conservative in nature and seems to reinforce and confine children in their subordinate role. Jessica Balanzategui strongly argues in her book *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema* that "possession and devil films construct the child as an empty vessel for evil to inhabit" (11). According to Balanzategui, the evil that is exhibited by the evil child does not come from within him/her but is almost always externally forced upon him/her by demon and devil-like figures. Regan in *The Exorcist* for example is not evil because of inherent qualities of her own but because her body is taken over by an evil spirit. From this observation we could say that the term evil child then is a bit misleading since it suggests that the child is inherently evil, but it seems that it is more accurate to state that they are corrupted by external evil forces. Children are thus rendered here as empty spaces to be taken advantage of. And this conception of the child reinforces the idea that children are subordinate to adults for adults are often thought of as fully formed rather than empty. What is thus being emphasized by the evil child convention is the idea that children are adults in the making and that they therefore lack all kinds of emotional and social competencies. Authority, social skills, rationality and overall competence are some examples of skills that we usually think that children gradually acquire on their way to adulthood. And this notion that the child is lacking

in all kinds of areas translates to pragmatic daily life. We don't allow young children for example to travel on their own or let them see violent films because we think that they are not ready for those experiences.

The evil child thus frames children as inexperienced and empty, a notion that has been around since the enlightenment. In his book *Childhood in Modern Europe* Colin Heywood remarks that in the period of the Enlightenment dominant religious conceptions of children from the medieval times were severely challenged (84). The religious notion of original sin framed children in the medieval period as inherently sinful but in the Enlightenment this was contested by scholars who had adopted a more secular perspective. The philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau contested this religious view of children and instead proposed to see children as a tabula rasa (blank slate) and innocent in nature respectively. The evil child convention thus reproduces an image of childhood that was conceived in the enlightenment. And it's worthwhile to ponder over the effects that this particular conception of childhood entails. Guoping Zhao for instance remarks in her article "The Modern Construction of Childhood: What Does It Do to the Paradox of Modernity?" that images of innocent children were used in campaigns that sought out to abolish child labor in London at the end of the eighteenth century and were used to raise the age in the consent law in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century (243). The figure of the innocent child formed in the Enlightenment thus has contributed a great deal to the rights and further protection of children. We could further say that the efforts of Locke and Rousseau have contributed to the demarcation between children and adults and which in turn has led to a greater interest into the lives of the younger generations. But the legacy of the Enlightenment on childhood also has a different side. It has played a crucial role in defining children as inexperienced and empty beings. For innocence does not only connote things such as good heartedness but also for instance a lack of knowledge and experience. The fact that the inexperienced child was conceived in the 18th century and is still very much alive today shows that it is quite a pervasive construction. But not only has this idea been around for a while but it also has some problematic consequences. In "Children as 'Being and Becomings': Children, Childhood and Temporality" Emma Uprichard outlines that viewing children as 'becomings', as incompetent and inexperienced adults in the making, is troublesome for this view is too much centered on the future and disregards children as individuals who exist in the present (304/305). If we lean too much on the conception of children as 'becomings' we might not be able to fully comprehend the challenges, needs and everyday complexities that children have to face.

But if the evil child convention lingers around a conception of children which disregards their lives of significance in the present and rather pays attention mostly to the lives they will eventually lead as adults in the future, why is it interesting and valuable to move away from this child figure to other archetypes such as the disturbing child? Alan Prout gives us a possible answer in his book *The Future of Childhood*. He writes that “Childhood ... like all phenomena, is heterogeneous, complex and emergent” and cannot be understood by “a set of oppositional dichotomies” (2). Prout emphasizes that childhood should be understood as complex and multifaceted. Chris Jenks further adds, in *Childhood*, that childhood can even contain contradicting and paradoxical notions:

the child is familiar to us and yet strange; he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another; he or she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a systematically different order of being. (2-3)

Prout and Jenks, who both write at the beginning of the 2000s, stress the futility of dichotomous conceptions of childhood. These conceptions present childhood as something which we can easily comprehend and understand, but Prout and Jenks contest this and instead advocate for us to see childhood as difficult and complicated. The evil child convention however precisely displays this reliance on dichotomous conceptions in order to affirm a satisfying and coherent understanding of childhood. For the evil child narrative mostly only renders the child into an innocent victim of corrupting evil forces.

This is why a move away from the evil child towards more complex children is interesting and worthwhile. Balanzategui, for instance, advocates the study of other child figures who *do* reflect on the complexity of childhood in order to better explore this complexity. Balanzategui states that the evil child convention is primarily focused on “the shallow tension established between the children as innocent victims of demonic possession and the evil that has come to inhabit their bodies” (11). She turns to the more complex uncanny child which she sees as a figure who dramatizes “the usually submerged paradoxical vectors that underlie contemporary understandings of childhood” (15/16). Childhood is conceptualized as a stage that predates adulthood but at the same time it also is a part of adult consciousness for every adult was once a child. The uncanny child, according to Balanzategui, dramatically exposes this paradoxical situation by their supernatural nature. She defines the uncanny child as either a ghost/spectre or as a child caught between the living and the dead (18). This ghost-like quality allows these children to reveal childhood as both fundamentally different as well as familiar to adult consciousness. But their uncanniness also turns these children into embodiments of

trauma, for their “connections with spectrality empower a previously repressed traumatic experience from the past to reemerge in, and disrupt, the present” (19). In her discussion of *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) for example she remarks that “The Sixth Sense makes overt the uncanny child’s symbolic role as receptacle for the *adult’s* repressed trauma” (73). Cole, the child who can see dead people, functions for Balanzategui as a vessel who confronts Malcolm, the dead child psychiatrist played by Bruce Willis, with his former repressed trauma’s. Cole’s uncanny ability to see and interact with dead people is utilized and directed here to draw attention to the traumatic experiences of an adult. And for Balanzategui this mechanism is found in most if not all uncanny child narratives. Other films that she places under the umbrella of the uncanny child narrative are films like *The Changeling* (Peter Medak, 1980), *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) and *Pan’s Labyrinth* (Guillermo Del Toro, 2006).

But even though Balanzategui’s move from evil to uncanny children leads to interesting, complicated child figures, there are still cinematic troubling children to be found who are even more unknowable. Uncanny children like Cole in *The Sixth Sense* might defy the evil/innocence dichotomy that is characteristic of the evil child, but we are still able to comprehend them through a supernatural narrative. Cole is a child caught between the living and the dead, there is no uncertainty about that. But there are troubled children to be located whose nature even defies (supernatural) explanation. Two films that present us with truly ambiguous troubling children for instance are *The White Ribbon* (2009) directed by Michael Haneke and *Birth* (2004) directed by Jonathan Glazer. The disturbing children in these films are characterized by an ambiguousness that cannot be explained by the evil or uncanny child archetype. For both of these archetypes are upheld by supernatural narratives that ultimately make the child comprehensible and knowable to us, even if the latter of these archetypes is more complex than the former. But in the films by Haneke and Glazer the children don’t seem to fit any narrative mold. Instead of blood craving monsters or ghosts, the disturbing children of the fictional town of Eichwald and the 10-year-old boy (Sean) who claims to be the reincarnation of a dead lover’s husband seem to present us with a breed of troubling youngsters seemingly defined by ambiguity and unease. Their eeriness, uncomfortable appearance and capability to disturb us cannot be interpreted as evil for they are not clearly presented as a threat or are deliberately disguised by ambiguity. They make a disturbing impression on us, but we’re often left wondering why.

What is furthermore a characteristic of these disturbing children, besides their ambiguity, is that they have agency. They seem capable of having an influence on their own lives as well as on the lives of people around them. This is noteworthy for the evil and uncanny child do not have significant agentic powers. Evil children are only able to act when they are seized by an external force. Since the evil child convention emphasizes children as empty beings it also derives them of their agentic power. The one who acts is not the child, but it is the evil spirit who has corrupted the child. Balanzategui's discussion of the uncanny child however also has little room for children's agency. For instance, when she discusses the uncanny child character of Danny in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) her interest lies in how he is positioned in relation to his parents. She ultimately concludes that childhood is presented as disturbed in the film "because the child is impossibly intertwined with yet simultaneously impenetrable to the adult's psyche" (52). Balanzategui is mostly concerned with our understanding of childhood's paradoxical temporal nature, and not so much with questions surrounding children's agency. Where the evil child illustrates problematic notions of childhood innocence and the uncanny child exposes the contrasting time vectors connected to childhood constructions, childhood agency is still very much underdiscussed in relation to troubling children in film.

But what does it mean that the ambiguous disturbing child has agency? Why does the disturbing child have agency and the evil child does not? That is what we will be exploring, the meaning we can attribute to the agency of the disturbing child. In order to answer this question, we will examine the films *The White Ribbon* and *Birth* who both feature disturbing children. What's interesting is that both films were released and produced in roughly the same time period, the 2000's. This allows us to question how this particular time period contributed to these troubled depictions of children that are eerie and unsettling outside of the usual framework of the supernatural. Prout argues that the destabilizing social order at the end of the twentieth century, due to significant social, technological and economic changes, has also affected our notion of childhood (7). He writes that:

New ways of speaking, writing and imaging children are providing new ways of seeing them and these children are different from the innocent and dependent creatures that appeared to populate the first half of the twentieth century. These new representations construct children as more active, knowledgeable and socially participative than older

discourses allowed. They are more difficult to manage, less biddable and hence are more troublesome and troubling (7).

The way Prout describes these “new representations” of childhood, from the end of the twentieth century onwards, closely resembles the fundamental features of the cinematic disturbing child. Especially his decision to describe these new representations as “active” and “troubling” allows us to see the disturbing children in *The White Ribbon* and *Birth*, characterized by agency and disturbing features, as such a new representation of childhood in the 2000’s as a result of the disruption of social order at the turn of the new millennium. This means that the outcome of our exploration of childhood agency should not be seen as a universal quality of childhood agency but rather as specifically connected to the turn of the new millennium.

The central argument that I will make is that the disturbing child acquires its agency through its ambiguousness. We will develop this argument by firstly reflecting on the ambiguous nature of the children. Through describing how their ambiguity is created, both cinematographically and psychologically, we will then ask ourselves how the films suggest that their ambiguousness allows for their agentic powers to flourish. William Wandless’ article “Spoil the Child: Unsettling Ethics and the Representation of Evil” provides us with an interesting starting point for this exploration. He states that the supernatural presence which creates evil children “spares the audience certain kinds of interpretive effort by turning explanatory emphasis away from the child and toward the presence inhabiting her” (134). Wandless suggests that the evil child is entrapped in a supernatural narrative structure which explains the child and is thus also robbed of its agency. His remarks allow us to consider the potential for uncertainty and ambiguousness to play a significant role in the creation of agency. In order to explore this in the films, we will ask ourselves how the children in the films use their agency. By doing this the relationship between their ambiguousness and their agency becomes better to define. The discussion and analysis of the ambiguousness and agency of the disturbing child will be embedded in different social contexts. For *The White Ribbon* the concept of the risk society will be used to frame the actions of the children as an exercise in risk management. In *Birth* we will contextualize Sean’s agency as being a constructive part of a mourning process. As mentioned earlier, the discussion of troubling children in large parts comes down to unveiling childhood constructions. And these unveiled constructions are often confrontational to us, for they reveal some unnerving truths about how we tend to view children. The evil child highlights our desire to define children as innocent empty beings whereas the uncanny child

emphasizes children's vital role for the identity of the adult which sits in contrast with our tendency to place the child in the category of the other. This leaves us to wonder what subconscious childhood ideologies are present in the disturbing child, characterized by a significant agentic power. What does this particular child have to reveal?

CHAPTER 1 – THE WHITE RIBBON

AGENCY

In this chapter we will be discussing how *The White Ribbon* represents the ambiguity and agency of the disturbing child. Firstly, we will discuss the work of sociologists Allison James and Anthony Giddens to establish a conceptualization of agency. After that our attention focusses to describing the ambiguousness of the children, followed up by an analysis of the children's agentic display. The outcome of this analysis will then be contextualized through the concept of the risk society. We conclude this chapter by discussing the relationship between ambiguousness and agency that will emerge throughout our discussion.

Allison James in her article "Agency" sums up that childhood agency within childhood studies is generally understood as the idea that children are social actors who actively participate in the construction of their own lives, the lives of others and the society in which they live (41). And she goes on further to stress that to discuss childhood agency is to emphasize that the lives of children are worthy of study independent of the lives of adults (41). James wants to emphasize here that the agency of children does not simply refer to their ability to do stuff or make things happen, but that we are to understand these actions as being part of larger societal structures and relationships with others. The conception of children as social actors therefore amounts to, according to James, that they not only act with regards to their daily lives but that they also play significant roles in the construction of other people's identities and society as a whole. This conception of children's agency which emerged during the 1980's was partly made possible, according to James, by the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens and his idea of structuration, which we will discuss further on. Leading up to the 1980s there had been much debate whether the social sciences should focus on the social structures found in our lives or on the capacity that individuals have to act within those structures. Kylie Valentine outlines in her article "Accounting for Agency" for instance that these two different conceptions have different ideas about locating agency. She roughly distinguishes between liberal and social theories of agency. She states that liberal theories of agency are oriented around individuals and propose that one attains agency in accordance with one's growth in rational abilities and sense of futurity and self-awareness (349). This theoretical model thus stresses that agency is an individual

matter and that personal/individual growth leads to greater agentic power. Social models of agency however distance themselves from individuality and argue that social constructions determine to a great extent who has agency and who hasn't. Valentine remarks that for instance "those who are privileged appear to have agency in part because their environment suits their needs" (351). People who are deaf for instance are usually thought of as having less agency. Liberal theorists would argue that this is the case because they have dysfunctional ears, their body limits them from fully participating in society. Social theorist however would claim that deaf people have less agency not because of their disabled ears but because most social structures are organized in accordance with the lives of people who aren't deaf. There is thus a tension between structure and individuality which Anthony Giddens tried to reconcile with his term structuration in his book *Central Problems in Social Theory*. He argued that "every act which contributes to the reproduction of a structure is also an act of production and as such may initiate change by altering the structure at the same time as it reproduces it" (69). What he means with this quote is that when someone reproduces an existing social construct the reproduction is never completely the same as the construct and that there is room for individual agency to contribute something to the social construct. Language might be a good example to illustrate this. There are theories and constructs about how we should use language to write and speak. We could say that the social construct of language imposes on us a set of rules, but these rules are not always fully abided by. We have room to either ignore or dismiss these rules and to change and appropriate language which ultimately might change the bigger social construct of language. The use of street language might be a good example of this. Street language often ignores the social construct of language and comes up with its own variations which due to popularity might shape the original construct. Giddens is thus arguing that neither structure nor agency should be considered more important than the other but that they should be seen as two sides of the same coin, it is the interaction between the two that is of significance here.

INNOCENCE IN THE WHITE RIBBON

What we can take away from James and Giddens in our analysis of children's agency in *The White Ribbon* is that we should not only examine when and how children exercise agency, but we should also ask ourselves in what social context they do this and how this context influences their agency and vice versa. We will now establish the plot of the film after which we discuss the ambiguousness of the children.

Haneke's acclaimed film *The White Ribbon* takes place in a rural German village during the 1910s, just before the start of the First World War, and focusses on a series of strange and unsettling events that shake up the town community: a deliberately placed wire causes the town doctor to make a terrible fall from his horse, a woman dies after the rotten wooden floor beneath her collapsed, a barn goes up in flames and a handicapped boy is attacked and is left nearly blind. These are some of the disturbing events that take place but there are far more strange and sinister events that occur in the film. It's interesting that the film never reveals who was responsible for the disturbances in the town. The only hint that we get is from the schoolteacher. Near the end of the film he puts forth the suspicion that the various children living in the town might be responsible. He finds it suspicious that the children always seem to be around when something horrible happens and is especially wary when one of the children seems to predict the mutilation of Karli. He confronts the children with his accusation but in the end nothing is revealed. But if we put the accusations of the schoolteacher aside, thematically the film also seems to hint that the children might be held responsible for the acts of terror. Klara and Martin, two of the pastor's children, get punished by their father for misbehaving and as part of their punishment he ties a white ribbon on each of their arms to remind them of their innocence. The title of the film refers to this conviction that children are innocent in nature, or maybe more accurately, that children should be innocent. This act could be interpreted, especially by a modern audience, as a silly and desperate attempt by the father to force his children into an innocent state which probably leads the audience to question this supposed innocence of the children. The title of the film could hence be read ironically. What further makes the children become scrutinized is that the film is often interpreted as an exploration on the roots of Nazism, as shown for example in Allen Irwin's article "The White Ribbon' examines roots of Nazism". The film seems to imply that these children will become the Nazi's in the future, for the voice over in the beginning states that reflecting on the strange occurrences might help to explain what happened later. If the children are to become Nazi's, then they surely can't be innocent. Since *The White Ribbon* presents children as the primary suspects of a whole series of crimes it becomes an interesting case study for the examination of children's agency.

AMBIGUOUS CHILDREN IN THE WHITE RIBBON

We will firstly discuss how the disturbing children in Haneke's film differ from their evil counterparts by describing their ambiguous nature. Once we have done that, we turn our attention to their agency to explore how these two relate to each other. The children in Haneke's film could be seen as a reference to the evil child convention simply because they are seen as a (potential) source for evil, but they are also quite distinct from them. Karen J. Renner points out in her book *Evil Children* that the idea of evil is closely bound to the supernatural. She states that: "The word "evil" required such a sweeping and permanent judgment that it seemed to me that "evil" could only exist in a supernatural or at least supernormal world" (6). Evil, according to Renner, should be considered as a supernatural phenomenon for the term would be too simplistic and neglects our social complex world. If we are to follow Renner's reasoning, we would have to conclude that the children in the film are not evil simply from the fact that the narrative is rooted in a historical context. But the most striking difference that the film displays in relation to typical evil child narratives is how it depicts the notion of childhood innocence. Dominic Lennard points out in his book *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors* that "children's innocence and vulnerability is routinely and unquestioningly referenced" (10) and that "in the horror film, the regular use of the child as a victim sustains and even amplifies this characterization" (10). Evil child narratives tend to unquestionably reproduce the notion of childhood innocence, they assume that we all agree that innocence is a fundamental aspect of childhood. But even though it is a crucial theme in *The White Ribbon*, the film however doesn't affirm the innocent child conviction but rather critically enquires this assumption. This is illustrated for instance by the pastor tying a white ribbon to the arms of his two children. For the pastor believes in the innocence of children and is trying to enforce this, which implies that he thinks that they should be protected, but at the same time has no problem with severely beating them. The film thus suggests that the assumption of childhood innocence is problematic. And it problematizes the conception of childhood innocence further by casting the children in an ambiguous light. For the film frames the children as the victims of abusive parental control as well as the possible perpetrators. We are never sure whether we should empathize or suspect the children. One moment they are being beaten by their parents the next moment they suspiciously roam around the aftermath of a crime scene. And this uncertainty undermines the firm conviction of childhood innocence. One of the ways in which the film illustrates this ambiguous nature of the children is through their silent and solemn behavior. The children don't say much and are often very calm, and we can interpret this in roughly two different ways. The most obvious

explanation for their quiet behavior is that they are being oppressed by their parents. They are literally being deprived of their voices and are afraid to voice their thoughts for they risk hard punishment. But at the same time there is also something eerie about their quiet nature. The schoolteacher near the end of the film explicitly states that he has the suspicion that the children are hiding something. The fact that they don't say much could thus not only be a sign of their oppression but also of their possible cunning and scheming. The ambiguousness of the children thus comes down to their dubious position as innocent victims as well as presumably being threatening.

CHILDREN'S AGENCY AS CURIOSNESS

In this section we will analyze how the children exercise their agency in the film. It is important that we ask ourselves this question because once we have done this, we can more concretely examine the relationship between their agency and ambiguous presence. At first it may seem worthwhile to attribute the mysterious crimes in the film to the agentic force of the Eichwald children. They are the ones who are most explicitly framed as the perpetrators and the crimes would then become significant displays of the children's agentic powers. The issue however with interpreting the crimes as an agentic display is that even though the children are the most prominent suspects there is still no certainty or proof that they are the ones responsible. We never see them commit any crimes on screen so therefore it would be difficult to claim the attacks/crimes as their doing. We would base our argument on a mere suspicion. What is furthermore difficult about seeing the crimes in this light is that we get too close to the mechanisms of the evil child. For then we would be ascribing their agency to acts of malevolence, which is one of the key characteristics of the evil child. The evil child commits malevolence however without agency of their own whereas the disturbing children in Haneke's film would commit them with their own agency. But they would still be defined in terms of evil acts which could potentially lead to the overblown tension of innocence and evil. But if the crimes are not useful in our discussion of children's agency where else can we turn to? The strict rule of life that is forced upon the children by their parents doesn't really allow for much individual freedom for them. One is tempted to think that the oppression that the children have to endure leaves little room for agency, but there are a few moments in the film that suggests that their oppression actually creates agentic possibilities for them. In these moments we find the children outside of the parental gaze, which seems to grant them the ability to act.

We will look at three scenes where the children seem to acquire agency through their curiosity. Early on in the film the schoolteacher spies Martin in the woods dangerously walking on the railing of a wooden bridge. He thinks that he is alone but is confronted by the schoolteacher who condemns his dangerous behavior. Martin exercises his agency here by escaping into the woods to perform some kind of private performance, but it is unclear to us what this performance means to him. Another moment where the display of agency by the unsupervised children leads to mystery occurs after the farmer's wife has died. One of the children visits her body in the middle of the night seemingly out of curiosity. He approaches the body to lift a cloth covering her face and then it is revealed that another child is already in the room watching the body. Then the two children sit next to the body as if they are guarding it. It is a strange moment where the children exercise their agency by sneaking into the night but again it is ambiguous what their intentions and motivations are exactly. Are they somehow responsible for her death and is this their way of showing remorse or do they visit the body just out of curiosity? To conclude these strange and mysterious moments with a final scene, we turn to the scene where two children discuss the idea of death. Rudi asks Anni what death is, who proceeds to explain it to him. It is ultimately made clear to the younger one that his mother has been dead for some time instead of being abroad this whole time. The first shot of their conversation frames them between two black silhouetted walls which gives their conversation a secretive atmosphere suggesting that it can only take place outside of the adult gaze. To converse about death in their strict social world seems like an act of defiance brought about by their agency. What is striking about these moments is that the children act when their parents are not around. This interesting parallel begs the question if there are also similarities to be found in the nature of their agency, in the kinds of actions they perform.

Even though the three scenes described above are all confusing in their own way there is still a common thread to be found in the actions of the children. Their actions in these scenes, besides being performed outside of the adult gaze, could be characterized by curiousness. Let's examine Martin's scene first. What's striking at first about this scene is its placement. Just before we see Martin and the schoolteacher in the woods, we see the farmer visiting the body of his dead wife. After Martin's scene we see two men enquiring about how she died. This placement is interesting especially since Martin seems troubled by something. Could it be that he has something to do with the death of the farmer's wife? The juxtaposition of scenes seems to suggest something in that order. We may initially connect this scene with the death of the farmer's wife, which aligns with the suspicion that the children are not as innocent as they seem, but there is also another interpretation possible. The fact that Martin states that he wanted to

give God the opportunity to kill him may suggest that he is guilty, but it could also be that he thinks that he has failed God by failing his parents. The last time we saw Martin he was told by his father that he and his sister were going to get a beating for being late. Since Martin's life at home is dominated by religious doctrine maybe we could interpret his behavior in the forest as a way to mentally prepare himself for the punishment that he is about to face. It could be that his father has made him believe that he is a sinner and now he is exploring whether God thinks so too. When the schoolteacher says to him that he intends to tell his father about what he did in the forest Martin quite emotionally begs him not to do this. This not only stresses the potential punishment that the children of Eichwald continually face but also underlines that whatever Martin was doing in the forest could only be done in private. Martin's actions are thus framed as ambiguous. They could either be the sign of his involvement with a crime or with his oppression at home. And this uncertainty is moreover created by the audiovisual elements in this scene. After the schoolteacher sees Martin we get an establishing shot of Martin walking over the bridge. The static frame accentuates Martin's determination and concentration to walk over the railing. We hear the idyllic sounds of a creak, rustling leaves and chirping birds, but the frantic cries of the schoolteacher to stop Martin disturb the fairy tale like scenery, there is a clash between peace and danger here. The cries of the schoolteacher are meant to protect Martin from the danger that could befall on him but at the same time might also break his concentration which could lead to his fall. Martin's ambiguousness creates uncertainty in the schoolteacher. The static establishing shot of Martin walking is a point of view shot from the teacher's perspective, indicating that he has come to a halt, perplexed with what he sees. This uncertainty residing in Martin and also being reproduced by the schoolteacher seems to give Martin a kind of strength. The cries of the teacher do not seem to halt him but rather enforce his concentration, he is determined to finish what he started. But instead of determination we could also label his actions as a kind of curiousness. Martin doesn't answer the questions that he is being asked by the schoolteacher afterwards, and from his facial expressions he doesn't seem to simply withhold answers, but he rather comes across as looking for answers. And framing Martin's behavior as him being curious also aligns well with his reference to God. He is curious if God will punish him, or in other words he is curiously exploring his faith which only seems possible outside of the adult gaze. Martin's ambiguousness thus creates a layer of uncertainty which in turn sparks a curiosity within him. And through pursuing his curiosity he thwarts adult rule and attains agency.

Another scene which displays the agency of the children through curiousness, quite explicitly this time, is the scene where two of the children discuss the meaning of death while

eating some soup. The death of the farmer's wife prompts a conversation about death where the younger boy Rudi asks questions to the older girl Anni to find out what death is exactly. His curiousness is made apparent by the many rapid questions he asks, he seems eager to learn more. Again, it is noteworthy that there are no parents around. The absence of adults frames the conversation as a forbidden one. As if the children are speaking out of terms while discussing death. The curiousness of Rudi would probably have been halted by an adult for it touches upon sensitive subject matter. We could thus argue that he exercises his agency here by curiously pursuing his desire to learn more about death. There is however an interesting observation to be made about this curiosity that he exhibits. Curiosity could be associated with innocence, for innocence connotes ideas of ignorance. The curious nature of Rudi could then be seen as a sign of his innocence and ignorance. The fact that he asks many questions signifies that he is ignorant on the subject matter to a certain degree. But there is something which prohibits us from calling this child wholly innocent. The way he speaks eerily contrasts the speech of Anni. Where she speaks exactly as you would expect when speaking to a young child, simple language conveyed playfully, he speaks rather monotonous. There is one line uttered by him in particular which conveys a certain eeriness: "Aber du doch nicht Anni?". He says this right after Anni tells him that everyone must die. His tone of voice is noteworthy in its creepiness, he almost sounds like a typical evil child. He doesn't seem to be shocked by Anni's statement but rather gives a cold and slightly intimidating reply. This creepiness lends him a certain kind of power, as if for a moment he is pretending to be ignorant and is mocking Anni for not recognizing this. The comparison between Rudi and the evil child is partially made possible by his wide eyes throughout the scene. Dominic Lennard points out in his book *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors* that a recurring visual evil child trope is the looking child. He states that "the image of a staring child" has often been used "to convey a mysterious and disarming refusal of adult power" (51). Rudi's wide eyes at first may be seen as innocent but when he utters this eerie line, they suddenly turn him into a looking child resemblance, as described by Lennard. Only his disruptive gaze is not directed towards an adult but towards another child. Rudi is characterized by ambiguity in this scene because he comes across as innocent and curious but this is made uncertain by a subtle eeriness that slightly submerges. By being curious Rudi renders himself ambiguous, for we have difficulty grasping him which in turns empowers him. He yields agency precisely because he defies explanation.

In the final scene to be discussed the curious agentic display of the children is once again presented as something which is unexplainable. One of the children visits the dead body of the farmer's wife in the middle of the night. He approaches the body slowly and seems a little

nervous. He slowly tries to lift the cloth that is covering her face but then he hears some shuffling in the corner of the room. He shifts his gaze and sees that another child is sitting in the room who shortly after calls out to him by saying his name: “Karli”. The fact that Karli is the one who is sneaking into the night might come as a surprise, even though we have clearly seen his face. Karli thus far in the film has been shown to be severely mentally handicapped. And in this scene his handicap does not show at all, which makes it easy to not recognize him. Karli walks over to the other kid, and they sit side by side. There are two children here that exercise their agency by sneaking into the night who are seemingly intrigued and curious about the dead body. And what is even more striking is that one of these children has a mental handicap. But again it is not entirely clear why they want to visit the dead body. Karli is not a relative of the farmer’s wife for he is the son of the town doctor and we do not know the identity of the other child. It is hard to tell if they visit the body out of sorrow or out of morbid curiosity. The fact that they visit the body at all seems to suggest the latter while their consoling gestures at the end seem to suggest the former. The darkness of the different shots gives the actions of the children a secretive nature but at the same time also obfuscates them. When Karli turns around to witness the other child, the darkness of the frame prohibits us from seeing who it is. This lack of visual clarity strengthens the lack of understanding that is produced by the actions of the children. It is evident that they are curious and that they can realize this curiosity outside of the adult gaze but it is unknown to us why the children behave the way they do. The vagueness of the children’s behavior is further enforced by Karli’s surprising transformation, it is unclear to us how he comes across so differently in this scene. Again it is not clear whether the children’s curiosity should be seen as innocent or as suspicious. Their agentic display is thus ambiguously characterized, cementing once again that their ability to act is closely tied to their unexplainable nature.

In the scenes discussed above it becomes possible to argue that children’s agency in the film is constructed through various moments of curiosity. This specific type of agentic display seems only possible when the adults are not around. This not only frames their curious behavior as something which is not likely to be tolerated by the adults but also as something which is unknowable to the adults in the sense that they will have trouble understanding them. This lack of understanding comes down to the uncertainty whether the children should be seen as innocent or as suspicious/dangerous. This ambiguous nature is explored by the children through their curiosity, which demonstrates that their ability to act is significantly influenced by their ambiguity.

THE RISK SOCIETY

We have established that one of the more interesting ways in which the children exercise their agency is through their curiosity, and that this curious behavior is enabled by and a part of their ambiguous nature. Now we will turn to the social theory of the risk society as an interesting social context in which we can understand the children's curious behavior. In this section we will discuss the fundamental aspects of the theory. Once we have done that we can begin to relate the theory to the film so that we can comprehend the children's curious actions. It is important to add this social context to the discussion for Giddens pointed out that to understand agency we should not only look at action but also at the social structure where actions take place.

If we follow Giddens with his structuration theory, we should ask ourselves what social framework is useful and interesting for our analysis of agency in Haneke's film. My interest specifically here is to use *The White Ribbon* to look at modern conceptions of children's agency. At first glance this might seem strange for the events in the film take place in the 1910s, but we must remember that the film was made in 2009 and therefore *does* offer a modern perspective on the subject matter. Michael Haneke himself also stressed that the film should not only be interpreted as an examination of Germany's infamous historic past. In an interview from 2009 with the Dutch online magazine *Filmkrant* Haneke was asked why the German subtitle "Eine Deutsche Kindergeschichte" was not translated in the film. His response was that he only wanted Germans to understand the film as a story about the history of Germany so that people from other countries could more easily attach their own meanings to the film (Haneke). When browsing through articles online it also seems that most people interpret the film as an exploration of the roots of evil, and evil here is often written about in a very general sense and it is not necessarily used to refer to Nazism. Moreover, the static camerawork, black and white photography and voice-over in the film all help to distance the viewer from the material. This is not a film where we immerse ourselves in its world, but we rather are forced to look at it from a distance which subsequently allows us to better compare the film through our own social reality, very much like Brecht's "verfremdungseffekt". This remark by Haneke, the consensus found online and the formal presentation of the film further emphasize the universal quality that the film seems to have and therefore presents itself as a suitable object for a modern analysis of agency.

We could ask ourselves why this interest in the roots of terrorism, both from the point of view of the filmmaker and the audience, was voiced during the period when the film was released. Can we read the film, and its subject matter, as symptomatic of the 2000's when it was released? One of the most influential and interesting social theories of late modernity has been the conception of the risk society. This grand social theory was conceived by the sociologists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens during the 1980's and gained significant attraction by the 1990's. This theoretical framework that Beck and Giddens both separately contributed to tried to describe how in late modernity society shapes itself in accordance with the management of risk. Late modernity is a social theory which posits that from the 1980's onwards highly developed societies are characterized amongst other things by globalization, individuation, privatization and the information revolution. In these highly technological societies, according to Giddens in his article "Risk and Responsibility", modernization itself produces so called manufactured risk in contrast to natural risk which is caused by natural processes (4). The former refers to things like pollution, diseases, crime and acts of terrorism whereas the latter talks about disasters such as earthquakes and volcano eruptions. Manufactured risk thus refers to those hazards that are the result of human activities which, according to Giddens, are intensified in the risk society. What is important to emphasize here though is that the theoretical model of the risk society does not propose that life has become inherently more dangerous or risky but rather that the idea of risk has become a defining concept in the arrangement of society, as pointed out by Giddens in his book *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*:

The point is not that day to day life is inherently more risky than was the case in prior eras. It is rather that, in conditions of modernity, for lay actors as well as for experts in specific fields, thinking in terms of risk and risk assessment is a more or less ever-present exercise. (123-4)

Though the risk society was thought of and articulated in the 80s and 90s, the theory doesn't lose much of its relevancy going into the 21st century. The 9/11 terrorist attacks, growing awareness on the effects of climate change, the 2008 financial crisis, devastating earthquakes and the more recent example of the corona virus all strengthen the notion that the risk society is very much alive in the new millennium. The social theory of the risk society is an incredibly interesting and relevant for our discussion of childhood agency. Even though these manufactured risks, as described by Giddens, are caused by human interaction there is also this

sense that we have very little control over these risks. The coronavirus being a recent example of this. We could not prevent the virus from significantly threatening our health, economy and social life. Because manufactured risks are the unintended byproduct of technological progress, we feel helpless when we are subjected to them. Human agency in the context of the risk society is increasingly more scrutinized for our actions seem to be less adequate to avert (potential) risks. And thus within the context of processes of risk management (which is a matter of human agency) it becomes increasingly vital to reflect on what it means to be able to act in such an environment.

THE RISK SOCIETY AND THE WHITE RIBBON

Now that we have established the fundamental aspects of the risk society, we can start to think about how its mechanisms exist in *The White Ribbon*. Our examination will lead to the conclusion that the film presents the children as the ones who continually risk hard punishment by their parents. And this observation makes it possible to frame their actions of curiosity as an exercise in risk management.

The examination that the film performs on the roots of terrorism and evil could also be interpreted as an exercise in risk management. One of the key aspects of the construction of the risk society is that the management of risk primarily comes down to the prevention of risk and therefore is characterized by a sense of futurity. Giddens notes in *Making Sense of Modernity: Conversations with Anthony Giddens* that the risk society is “a society increasingly preoccupied with the future” (209). The fact that the film has no main character but is instead focused on a community as a whole allows us to see the film as a societal allegory. And this gives the film a future oriented quality even though it goes all the way back to the 1910’s. The examination of the past that it performs seems to elicit a warning of some sorts for the future. As mentioned earlier, the film should not just be read as an exploration of the roots of fascism in Germany but should also be considered in light of the (possible) emergence of the darker side of human nature at other times and other places. There is a mechanism of risk management underpinning the film similar to the mechanisms found in the risk society, for the film seems to suggest that we could prevent radicalization (risk) in the future by reflecting on the way we raise our children.

When we read the article “Risk anxiety and the social construction of childhood” by Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott it becomes clear that there are more similarities between Haneke’s

film and the risk society. Jackson and Scott discuss how the risk society affects the social construction of childhood. They argue that “the developmental or socialization paradigm is at the heart of risk anxiety and risk management in relation to children” (92). Their point being that the conception of children as becoming adults is central to the process of managing risk when it concerns our children. Jackson and Scott argue that within the risk society children are more likely to be perceived as in danger, which results in overprotecting parents. There are increased worries by parents that their children are at risk for instance when they go outside or when they go online. By shielding them away from these potential hazards it is thus stressed that children are conceived as passive and vulnerable. But Jackson and Scott furthermore stress that children can also be conceived as a danger to other children. This view is mostly held with regard to other people’s children, as stated by Jackson and Scott: “it is common for parents to see their own children primarily as innocent and vulnerable as opposed to other children who are potentially threatening” (95). Parents fear that other children might harm, corrupt or damage their own children. Contemporary examples of this fear for example might be (cyber) bullying or children exposing each other with inappropriate (sexual) content. We could thus summarize that within the risk society there is a tendency to view children both as at risk (particularly one’s own children) as well as becoming a risk themselves (particularly other people’s children). When we return to *The White Ribbon* we see a similar oscillation between these two ideas about children. The film has an interest to represent children as being innocent victims of the oppression by their parents but at the same time also quite explicitly frames them as the possible suspects for a variety of gruesome crimes (including a threat to other children). This oscillation ties back to the ambiguous nature of the children, the uncertainty whether we should sympathize with the children or not.

But even though the film represents children facing risk as well as children posing a risk, the former is much more relevant than the latter when we take into account the way in which the children exercise their agency: outside of the parental gaze. This suggests that it is not the children’s threat to pose a risk but the risk they face from their parents that plays a significant part in the children acquiring agentic powers. Let’s examine the children’s risky situation more closely. Punishment by their parents is a constant threat that hovers over their lives. We see this punishment happen before our own eyes, but the possibility of punishment is also portrayed for the children often seem frightened or anxious around their parents. When the doctor returns home from his stay in the hospital for example his son Rudy hides somewhere in the house seemingly scared to greet him. There are also several scenes where the children have dinner with their families and there is a disquieting silence around the dinner table which

we could ascribe to the fear the children have of doing something wrong. There is a frequent tension to be found in the film whenever a child interacts with their parents for you fear that they might get into trouble and face hard punishment. When one of the children presents his father (the pastor) with a bird that he has found and wants to take care for there is still a tension that his approach might infuriate the father, even though his suggestion is quite harmless. There are also two interesting scenes where children are being beaten by their parents with some sort of punishment sticks. These objects seem to have only one purpose which is to beat children. Twice in the film are they used but we are interestingly never shown them in action, it is visually made clear to us that they will be used but ultimately we only hear the beating and shrieks of the punishment. Near the beginning of the film the pastor beats Martin and Klara for being late. We never enter the room where the beating takes place, but we only see the characters walking towards the room and hear the eventual shrieks of the children. What is interesting about this scene is that Martin is given the task of bringing the punishment stick to his father. The fact that Martin is given this task emphasizes the role that he has played in his own punishment. The father wants to remind him that he is to blame for his own abuse. By forcing the children to play a part in their own punishment the father tries to draw attention away from the fact that he is the one who is putting his children at risk. But also to deliberately not show the beating reminds us that even though we don't see any harsh treatment on the outside take place in the village, it could well be that this peaceful exterior is in fact an illusion. The beatings are presented as something out of sight, secretive. So not only does the film display the punishment of children but it also displays the tension of the possibility of punishment, the risk of punishment.

Risk in *The White Ribbon* is thus best specifically located in the risk that the children have to endure in their daily lives with regard to the harsh punishment that they could receive at any moment from their parents. And this location of risk makes clear how Haneke's film differs from the risk society as conceived by Giddens and Beck. Giddens and Beck argue that in the risk society modernity itself produces risk, so risk is thought to be produced by the effects of technological development. In *The White Ribbon* however risk is located much more within our reach. It is located in the family dynamics, religion and in the way we raise our children. In the film risk is thus located closer to home, and often literally at home. Risk is presented here as something which we can prevent with human intervention and agency, which is a significant contrast with the manufactured risk of the risk society which we feel overwhelmed by. So whereas the risk society sees risk as the byproduct of human interference, in other words

agency, *The White Ribbon* presents human agency itself as potentially harmful and therefore risky, specifically in relation to childhood.

Since the children risk cruel and harsh treatment by their parents, we might frame their curiosity as an exercise in risk management. The main reason which allows us to make this claim is the absence of the adult gaze. Since managing risk is primarily about preventing or averting risk, the privateness of the children's display of curiosity could then be seen as a way to escape from their risky parents. For if they are not around their parents, they significantly reduce the risk they face. And children participating in activities of risk management is noteworthy for the theory of the risk society often envisions them as either a risk or being at risk, but rarely as the ones who manage risk. This dichotomy of children being a threat as well as vulnerable at the same time is a persistent conceptualization of childhood in the risk society as we have discussed earlier. But this dichotomy is not useful for accounting children's capabilities of managing risk. In his book *The Future of Childhood* Alan Prout asserts that oppositional dichotomies are inadequate to understand childhood's increasingly more diverse and ambiguous nature in late modernity (67). The film demonstrates the limitations of relying on the dichotomy of threatening/vulnerable (guilty/innocent) children voiced by Prout. As established earlier, the film is interested to frame the children both as the possible perpetrators as well as the innocent victims of parental terror. But interestingly this dichotomy is never resolved. We can't say at the end of the film whether the children are truly innocent or guilty. There is an inadequacy or uselessness underpinning the good/evil dichotomy. The dominant presence of this dichotomy overshadows other meanings we might attribute to the children, their curious actions being an example of this. We must look hard to locate this curiosity. Just as the adults in the film are oblivious to the fact that they are treating their children in a horrible way, so are we oblivious to anything that concerns the children besides their possible involvement with the crimes or their mistreatment. Prout's argument about the inadequacy of childhood dichotomies thus frames the risk management that the children perform through their curiosity in the film as a complicated and hence ambiguous act.

Haneke's film features disturbing children who resemble the typical evil children found in horror cinema but ultimately differentiate themselves through their ambiguous nature and bigger agentic capabilities. Their ambiguity is defined by the uncertainty whether the children should be seen as innocent victims or as possible threats. Through close inspection it becomes apparent that one of the ways in which the children exercise their agency is by pursuing their curiosity outside of the adult gaze. In these curious moments, which occur briefly and sparsely,

there is always a particular ambiguous element present in the children's behavior. Their curious actions are innocent and suspicious at the same time. And the film suggests that the display of curiosity by the children is a way for them to navigate this ambiguousness. Their ambiguous qualities thus play a significant role in creating agency for the children. Through the context of the risk society, we can begin to understand their curious behavior as an exercise in risk management. The children continuously risk harsh punishment by their domineering parents which frames their secretive endeavors as a way to prevent and hence manage the risk they face. This implication that the film makes is incredibly significant and noteworthy for within the context of the risk society children are mostly conceptualized in a dichotomous way as either posing a risk to others or being at risk themselves. The film produces this dichotomous mechanism through the oscillation between representing the children as possible perpetrators and innocent victims. The risk management by the children brought about by their curiosity is overshadowed by this more dominant evil/innocent discourse and as a result is framed as a repressed quality of the children. At first it seems that childhood agency in *The White Ribbon* is under pressure by the strict order of life imposed by the parents. But when we look more closely, we observe the emergence of childhood curiosity through the cracks of this tight structure. But instead of framing the children as innocent beings, their curiosity positions them as ambiguous actors who engage in risk management.

CHAPTER 2 – *BIRTH*

Where Haneke's film lends itself perfectly for an analysis of children's agency in relation to societal structures, *Birth* however is much more suitable for an investigation into how children's agency might relate to the personal aspects of human existence. The former film being focused on a community the latter film is much more concerned with only a few human relationships. This difference allows us to explore the potential place children's agency can inhabit in larger societal structures as well as focus in on the role it can have in the dynamics of human interaction. Let's start our discussion by briefly recounting the plot of the film so that we can then shift our focus to the representation of childhood agency.

Ten years after the death of her ex-husband Anna is about to remarry to her new husband Joseph. She finally seems able to move on, but Anna's life is thrown into turmoil when right after her engagement she is approached by a ten-year-old boy Sean, who shares the same name of her dead ex-husband, who claims that he is the reincarnation of her former husband and asks her not to marry Joseph. At first Anna thinks that the young Sean might be playing a cruel joke on her. But once it is revealed that he knows information that only her Sean could know she gradually comes to believe that he is telling the truth. Throughout the film Anna shifts back and forth between conviction and despair until she is overcome by an existential crisis where her love as well as her grief for her late husband become enmeshed to the point where it suffocates her. It never becomes clear whether ten-year-old Sean was really a reincarnation or not.

Ten-year-old Sean, who will be called Sean from this point on, can easily be classified as a disturbing child for he displays both an intensified agentic force as well as an ambiguous presence. His ambiguous character stems from the fact that we know very little of his intentions. Is he really a reincarnation of Anna's former husband? Is he consciously pretending to be her former husband? Or can Sean's condition be explained by him being put under some kind of spell as Anna once suggests in the film? At the end of the film we still know very little what propelled Sean to do what he does. This ambiguity and uncertainty is what give Sean his disturbing presence. His solemn and silent mannerism paired with the vagueness of his intentions make us a little uncomfortable. Much of the discussion and analysis surrounding *Birth* is about making sense of Sean. The discourse is very much concerned with trying to define the conditions that constitute Sean's existence in the film. I am however not necessarily interested in exploring why Sean behaves the way he does. This chapter will focus on what Sean does and how this affects the people around him, Anna in particular, regardless of why he

does it. We will firstly define Sean's ambiguous characteristics in order to concretize how his ambiguousness contributes to his agency. After that we will examine how Sean utilizes his agency and contextualize this by looking at cinematic representations of mourning so that we can better understand the relationship between Sean's ambiguousness and his agency.

SEAN'S AMBIGUITY

We will begin our discussion of the film by asking ourselves how Sean differs from the evil child archetype by firstly zooming in on the ambiguousness that surrounds him. Once we have done that, we will begin to examine his other disturbing child quality, his agency. Besides the fact that Sean does not have any evil intentions, he also displays some other interesting and noteworthy differences with the evil child. In her book *Evil Children* Karen J. Renner distinguishes between many different kinds of evil children. She for instance discusses the different features and characteristics of gifted, ghost and possessed children. The fact that Renner is able to categorize the evil child using clearly defined terms suggests that the mechanisms of this archetype can be clearly observed. Renner further implies that the evil child is upheld by clear structures when she states that its creation by supernatural forces "exculpate the child from responsibility for even the most heinous of deeds" (7). The supernatural explanation of the evil child creates a clear and concise narrative for the audience to latch onto. We are never in doubt, for instance, why Reagan in *The Exorcist* is displaying evil behavior, for she is clearly being possessed by a demonic spirit. But the clear and coherent structures which we can apply to the evil child are rendered useless to explain Sean in *Birth*. Never in the film do we really grasp 'what is going on' with Sean. It remains vague throughout the entire film what propelled Sean to claim that he was a reincarnation. But his is not only achieved because the film doesn't offer us a satisfying resolution of Sean's character but also through how Sean is visually presented to us. Sean's ambiguousness is visually established early on in the film. After we have first glimpsed him in the lobby of Anna's apartment building, we next meet him at his own home. He sits on the edge of his bed and numbly looks straight ahead. His short hair and his round face give him an eerie, almost alien like, presence. The lighting accentuates this eeriness even further by casting half his face in darkness. We cut to a kid outside who is ringing the doorbell and calls out for Sean. We cut back to Sean, who doesn't respond and remains motionless. Then the camera starts to zoom in on Sean, stressing the

possibility that there is something brooding in him, unknown to us. This early scene establishes Sean's ambiguity that will characterize him through the rest of the film; a strange and eerie looking young boy cast in shadows who defies explanation.

But Sean's ambiguousness can still be more specifically defined. Since mourning is one of the most central themes in *Birth*, we are able to frame Sean's ambiguous qualities through the lens of Richard Armstrong's book *Mourning Films*. Armstrong argues that cinema as a medium is incredibly apt in communicating grief. Since films show us people, amongst other things, that are no longer there the medium becomes an interesting place to represent our ways of dealing with loss, according to Armstrong (1). He interestingly states that:

When the spectator sits before the screen, they sit before an image masquerading as something real. The knowledge that what is being looked at, typically adored, admired, longed for in the filmgoing scenario, but is not actually there, evokes the relationship between spectatorship and grief since grief is the emotional consequence of our investment in something that we can "see" in our mind's "eye" but which no longer exists (15).

Since we grieve people who are no longer with us, cinema's capability to show what is no longer there becomes a potent and power tool to express grief. One of Armstrong's central arguments is that language is inadequate to some degree when it comes to expressing the inner mechanisms of our grieving processes and that cinema can fill the gaps that language leaves behind. He outlines, by citing several authors, that due to the difficulty of conceptualizing death we are split into two while we mourn: here in the present and there in the past. In his discussion of *Birth*, Armstrong argues that Sean could be seen as an embodiment of cinema's ability to display the absence/presence dichotomy. He interestingly states that "The sense in which Sean is a screen upon which Anna projects recalls his initial manifestation, its *mise-en-scène*¹ so like the cinema" (133). Armstrong comes to this conclusion by looking at how the film visually represents Sean. He for instance notices that it isn't always made clear how Sean physically relates to other characters in the film and that he is also sometimes left out of the frame entirely. This observation made by Armstrong about Sean's visual representation centering around absence and presence has some interesting implications for how we conceive of his ambiguity. We could say that this particular visual display is in service of Sean's reincarnation claim. He

¹ Italic in original.

exists there in the present but at the same time signifies someone who is no longer there, Anna's late husband. But since we have established that Sean is an ambiguous figure, we could argue that this visual motif of absence/presence partially constitutes this ambiguity. If we are to follow Armstrong, we could argue that Sean's ambiguousness is significantly shaped by his fractured existence between the past and the present.

Although Sean at first glance seems to inhabit some of the features of a typical evil child, in particular his eerie presence, he ultimately distinguishes himself from this archetype by his ambiguousness. Where the evil child can be explained by a coherent supernatural narrative structure Sean is shrouded in mystery. We should ask ourselves then what the consequences are of this ambiguous nature of his. Firstly, Sean's ambiguousness is what makes him disturbing and a little frightening to us. As R. Nicholas Carleton points out in his article "Fear of the unknown: One fear to rule them all", fear of the unknown might be seen as *the* fundamental fear (5). This explains why our inability to grasp Sean leaves us disturbed. Whereas the evil child frightens us by way of grotesque imagery and jump scares, the disturbing child unsettles and disturbs us through its ambivalence. But there is another consequence created by Sean's ambiguousness: an increase in his agentic capabilities as a social actor. Renner points out that "the history of evil child narratives has largely been a series of efforts to confirm the essential innocence of children" (7). And this affirmation of childhood innocence, as we have discussed earlier, robs the evil child of its agentic power. It is not the child who acts out evil, but it is the doing of the evil spirit who has corrupted the child. The supernatural narrative structure which presents the evil child as a comprehensible figure thus also denies it its own agentic power. But we are then left wondering how the agentic capabilities of the child are affected when he/she is no longer presented as knowable but is instead framed as *unknowable*, as is the case with the disturbing child. In the upcoming sections we will see that under Sean's ambiguous guise in *Birth* there lies hidden his agency. And this is significant because, as pointed out by Renner, the evil child is deprived of its agency which raises the question why the disturbing child *does* display agency.

AGENCY AND NARRATION

If we want to examine how Sean's ambiguousness grants him greater agentic power and how he then utilizes his agency, it is important that we firstly develop the framework of grief in the film through which we are to understand his ambiguousness as well as his agency.

In this section we will examine how the film narratives Anna's grieving process and we will subsequently take a closer look at Sean's role in this process. I will argue that Sean's confusing and ambiguous nature allows him to bring back the past in such a way that he enables Anna to relive her traumatic break-up.

At the beginning of the film it seems that Anna has already gone through her grieving process for she has finally agreed to marry Joseph. But the appearance of Sean brings back old memories and shakes up her plans to start a new life by igniting the grieving process all over. Her marriage plans becoming spoiled and the fact that she at one point becomes enamored by a ten-year-old boy indicate that her love for her former husband is very much alive and that her grief has not been effectively processed. It becomes interesting to ask ourselves what Sean's role is in Anna's renewed grieving process. At first the most obvious interpretation is that Sean ignites her grief by reminding her of the life she led before she met Joseph. The shared name and his knowledge of her former husband serve as a catalyst for the re-emergence of her grief. But if we follow this interpretation, he not only activates her grief but also functions as a confrontational figure to Anna, drawing attention to her inability to have processed her emotional loss over the past ten years. The fact that Anna left Joseph in the waiting room for several years and needed to go to the grave of her ex-husband to ask for his permission to marry him indicates that she has been carrying this unresolved trauma with her for quite some time, and the emergence of Sean brings this into the light for all to see. When Anna eventually believes that Sean is really her husband it communicates to both the viewer as well as her family that she is still deeply devoted to her ex-husband and will believe anything to return to him. Sean functioning as a figure who activates and shines a spotlight on Anna's repressed failure to process her traumatic loss has a lot of weight to it but there is also another interpretation to be made which doesn't exclude this one but rather interestingly expands on it.

It could be argued that Sean not only confronts Anna with the failure to process her loss but that he also fulfills a therapeutic role where he (unconsciously) helps her to overcome her loss. We will now turn our attention to one of the most crucial scenes in the film where Sean exercises his agency by helping Anna experience an un-lived past connected to her former husband. The scene we are talking about here occurs when Sean reveals to Anna that he is not her reincarnated husband. He tells her this when he is taking a bath. Anna comes home and is told by the housekeeper that Sean is taking a bath. She hurriedly walks over to the bathroom, and we get a few fast cuts to emphasize her excitement of seeing him again. When she enters the bathroom, she positions herself on the edge of the bath and we get a subtle zoom in which leaves us with a close-up shot of Anna while she is speaking to Sean, who is outside of the

frame. She excitedly tells him that she has thought of a plan where the two of them run away together and wait until Sean has turned twenty-one so that they can get married. The following shot shows us Sean sitting in the bath, staring numbly ahead of him with dirt on his face. This shot is reminiscent of the scene where Sean sits numbly on his bed. Again his silence and immobility, paired now with the dirt stuck on his face, frames him as otherworldly and unreachable. We then cut to an intense over the shoulder shot from Anna's perspective where she caresses Sean's face and asks out loud: "I wonder what you are going to look like?". This intense shot is followed up by an even stronger visual statement where Anna's face almost takes up the entirety of the frame. And it is only fitting that she confesses her love for him in this climactic close-up shot. Anna at this point in the film is totally convinced that Sean is her late husband. But after Anna has proclaimed her love, we return to the over the shoulder shot to find Sean avoiding Anna's gaze. It remains quiet for a couple of seconds, but the silence is ultimately broken by Sean who tells Anna that he isn't Sean. She looks at him distraught upon which he then lets himself fall back in the bath so that he is completely submerged under water. This moment seems to refer to the prologue of the film where we see a baby emerging from water after Sean's death due to a heart attack while jogging. The baby emerging from water at the beginning of the film seems to indicate a (re)birth which frames Sean's submergence here as a death or an ending of some sorts. It remains unclear what Sean is trying to say with this gesture but since he has lost his reincarnation conviction, we could interpret it is a visual sign which strengthens this loss. We cut to a wider shot where for a brief moment we see Anna who shockingly stares at the empty bath. When she finally pulls Sean back up out of the water, he says to hear the most important line of this scene: "I am not Sean because I love you".

What is striking about the delivery of this line is that it is cut into two halves. When Anna pulls him out of the water, we hear Sean say "I'm not Sean" while the camera lingers on Anna. We hear "because I love you" when we cut back to Sean. The latter part of the line is also delivered with much more emotion than the former part. This divide in the line delivery and the editing seems to hint at Sean's fractured nature. He has come to realize that he is not Anna's former husband but at the same time still feels drawn to her and finds it difficult to leave her. Sean's ambiguousness becomes internalized here, for he too has difficulty making sense of himself. Also notice how Anna fantasizes about the two of them getting married while at the same time also childishly caresses his face, she too acts ambivalent towards Sean. But this ambivalence, highlighted by the dialogue and the editing, also grants Sean agentic possibilities. The uncertainty that characterizes Sean, and is revealed to himself in this scene, disarms Anna which gives him the opportunity to exercise his agency. For with this crucial line, Sean has

utilized the fullest of his agentic capabilities for he completely shatters the image that Anna had of her former husband. Sean is unconsciously telling Anna that her former husband didn't love her anymore before he passed away. It was revealed to us in the film that prior to the events depicted in the film, Clara, a friend of Anna and Sean, was having an affair with Sean. When Clara found out that a ten-year-old boy called Sean was proclaiming to be *her* former lover she knew that he could not be telling the truth. For she reasoned that he would have come to her. Because Anna was unaware of this affair this piece of information by Sean, although it is not delivered explicitly, could be seen as a crucial revelation for her with regard to her mourning for her late husband. For finding out that the person she has been mourning for over ten years was in love with someone else must come as an intense revelation. So, what Sean does here is that he plants a seed in Anna's head which will eventually help her to construct a narrative around her former husband. But Sean doesn't just accomplish this by uttering a single line, he also gives Anna the opportunity to experience a lover turning away from her. Anna at this point in the film is completely convinced that Sean is her late husband, but Sean's decision to abandon her allows Anna another chance to experience the end of a relationship, which she never got to experience with her real husband. From the perspective of Anna, Sean's statement that he isn't Anna's husband is experienced as a break-up, for she thought they were in love. And since this break-up moment coincides with the subtle reveal that her former husband didn't love her anymore, we can assert that she is in fact experiencing the break-up with *her* Sean. Sean's agency is thus not only expressed through the revelation of information but also through a performative enactment, whether consciously or unconsciously, of someone who is dead. What Sean essentially does here is that through his ambiguous mixture of past and present he uses his agency to enable Anna to realize the truth about her former husband.

NARRATIVE AND GRIEF IN BIRTH

We have observed that due to Sean's ambiguous relation with the past and present he is placed in a position where he is able to attain significant agentic powers, which he uses, whether consciously or unconsciously, to aid Anna in constructing a new narrative around her late husband. In this section we will be discussing Matthew Ratcliffe and Eleanor A. Byrne's article "Grief, self and Narrative" to better understand how Sean utilizes his agency. It is important to conceptualize this further so that we have a firmer grasp on how his ambiguousness enables his agency. I will develop the argument here that we can frame Sean's agency as a productive

contribution to Anna's mourning process. Ratcliffe and Byrne point out in their article that the relationship between grief and narrative has frequently been explored. Their point of departure is Peter Goldie's book *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind* in which Goldie argues that grief should be seen as a process which is unified by a narrative (61). Grief, according to Goldie, is a complicated ever shifting process which is ultimately held together by "the coherence of a narrative of the process" (61-62). Ratcliffe and Byrne concur with Goldie that grief could be framed as an ongoing process but undermine his argument that this process can be grasped through a unified narrative. They remark for instance that it is not clearly developed by Goldie how narrative unifies grief and that it is too restrictive to define grief as needing to be narratable (321). They point out that not all experiences that come to the surface during periods of mourning may be well suited to narration. In all Ratcliffe and Byrne stress that grief is too complicated and disruptive to be fully tied together by a narrative.

Ratcliffe and Byrne however propose that "the roles played by narrative in grief are more fruitfully considered in relation to something that the process *does*²" (322). Instead of connecting narrative to the process of grief itself, they argue that it is much more relevant to see narrative's potential in relation to the effects of grief. They shortly summarize that what the process of grief generally does is that it forces people to comprehend the loss of a loved one and that they have to negotiate a disruption by restoring coherence in one's life (322). They expand on this idea by stating that this disruption is often characterized by a loss of self-identity, for people often remark that a part of themselves dies when they lose someone dear to them. To understand what this loss of self implies Ratcliffe and Byrne strikingly point out that what constitutes a self is often not a conceptualization but is rather constituted by an experiential world (323). What they mean by this is that our identities are greatly determined by the experiences we have. When someone close to us dies this profoundly affects the experiences we have. If you regularly commute with a friend to work and occasionally go with said friend to the cinema, for instance, we will lose these experiences and thus a part of ourselves when this friend comes to pass away. Kathleen Higgins in her article "Aesthetics and the Containment of Grief" describes this process as the bereaved person being catapulted into an alternate world where everything seems to be out of balance (9). We can thus summarize that the loss of self which characterizes grief, according to Ratcliffe and Byrne, is brought about by the loss of experiences that entails the death of someone close to us. And through this particular

² *Italic in original*

understanding of grief Ratcliffe and Byrne see potential for narrative to play a significant role in restoring the disruption caused by emotional loss.

Ratcliffe and Byrne roughly distinguish between two kinds of narratives in relation to grief. The first of these is utilized to bring coherence, order and structure to the bereaved. What is often characteristic of these narratives, according to Ratcliffe and Byrne, is that they can achieve something that they call ‘continuing bonds’. With this term they are referring to the idea that instead of ‘letting go’ of someone who has passed away, which is how grief is frequently portrayed, grief in fact often encompasses a process of retaining connections with the deceased (326). One of the main goals of this particular kind of narrative then becomes to pin down exactly what someone was like before they passed away, which subsequently gives the bereaved a sense of stability. The second type of narrative described by Ratcliffe and Byrne, which will be the most relevant one for us to examine in *Birth*, is not so much about establishing an order or structure but is rather concerned with “destabilizing established patterns and opening up new possibilities” (327). They remark that this type of narrative is not utilized to paint an accurate picture of the deceased but is rather used to create “the possibility of endless revision and novelty” (328). Since it is nearly impossible to exactly define someone’s identity, it could be valuable for narratives that construct the past life of the deceased to leave things open ended, according to Ratcliffe and Byrne. By disrupting the image of a deceased person this opens up room for new interpretations of their life which can revitalize the spirit of the bereaved.

When we turn our attention back to the film, we can conclude that the way Sean utilizes his agency, by making Anna conceptualize and experience the truth about her former husband, is in fact a process of reconfiguring a narrative of the deceased. And the nature of this narrative is much more disruptive than stabilizing. For instead of continuing to see her late husband as a loving figure, which she has done for the last ten years, she now starts to see him as a cheater and a liar. Where Sean firstly disrupted Anna’s life by bringing back all kinds of repressed traumas, he now utilizes his agency, enabled by his ambiguous relationship to the past and present, to completely disrupt the narrative of her late husband.

ACTOR AND ACTION IN BIRTH

Sean provides Anna with narrative pieces that completely disrupt the image that she had of her late husband’s life before he died. But how does the film show that this disruptive

narrative has any effect on Anna's emotional well-being? It is important to further discuss this for it allows us to better conceptualize the relationship between Sean's ambiguousness and his agency. We will turn to Jennifer Hornsby's article "Agency and Alienation" to explore the relationship between agency and events. This exploration will be useful for us if we want to consider how the film suggests that the disruptive narrative reconfiguration of Anna's past, created by Sean, affects her. I will propose that the ending of the film suggests that even after Sean has abandoned Anna, and is physically separated from her, his actions are still able to affect her emotionally.

If we are to see Sean's ambiguousness (partially) as revolving around the confusing tension between absence and presence (past and present), this subsequently has noteworthy implications for his agency. Since Sean's presence in the film is always accompanied by an absence, the absence of Anna's former husband, it is interesting to ponder over the question what the effect is of *Sean's* absence at the end of the film once he and Anna have gone their separate ways. Is Sean still able to affect Anna? To answer this question we turn to Thomas Nagel who provides an interesting view on human agency when he points out in his book *The View From Nowhere* that "Everything I do or that anyone else does is part of a larger course of events that no one "does" but that happens" (114). According to Hornsby, what Nagel was trying to argue is that we become alienated from our own actions, since they become part of external events (174). When someone makes an abrupt brake while riding a bicycle, for instance, the squeezing of the handbrakes could then be seen as an action, whereas the bike coming to a halt could be seen as an event. Hornsby notes in her article that what Nagel is thus emphasizing here is that there is a distinction to be made between actions and the agents who produce those actions (174). An agent squeezes the brakes, the action of squeezing the brakes creates the event of the bike coming to a halt, both the actor as well as the action *does* something.

When we take this agentic notion in mind the ending of *Birth* becomes an interesting place to examine Sean's agency even though he is not physically present. At the end of the film when Anna has come to believe that Sean isn't her husband reincarnated after all, we find her on her wedding day with Joseph. All seems to go well until we see Anna collapse at the beach. She roams around aimlessly in the water, completely devastated and overflowed with emotions that clash on her psyche in unison with the waves around her. Joseph worriedly goes over to her, and they ultimately walk away together. What I argue is that Anna's breakdown here is an event created (partially) by Sean's actions. Sean's actions made Anna see and experience the truth about her former lover, which means that we can see her breakdown as an internal struggle about coming to grips with that realization. What does her mourning mean if her late husband

loved someone else? I thus claim that Sean's actions have a certain degree of autonomy, in line with Nagel's argument, and are affecting Anna at the end of the film. Let's examine how the film suggests that this process is taking place.

What is striking about this ending is that right before we encounter Anna on the beach we cut away to Sean at school while we hear him recite a letter he wrote to Anna. In the letter he reflects on the events that have occurred between them. This moment is displayed in one single zoom-in shot where we see multiple children getting their picture taken until it is Sean's turn, at this moment the camera has stopped zooming in so that his face fills up the entire screen. What is striking about this shot is that Sean is being photographed just seconds before we saw Anna being photographed on her wedding day. This thematic resemblance between the two moments suggests that even though Anna and Sean are physically apart there is still some sort of connection between them. It is also interesting to note that this link between them is upheld by a camera. Especially since Armstrong sees the camera's ability to capture the past as a striking communication tool to express grief. Because of the thematic cut to Sean and Armstrong's notion that the camera is a communication tool for grief, it becomes significant that Anna's emotional breakdown starts, or is initiated, when her picture is taken. It may suggest that the thought of what Sean revealed to her and made her experience is hitting her in this moment. And there is a very subtle visual clue which might underscore this argument. The cut from the first shot of Anna being photographed to the second shot happens exactly at the moment when the photographer takes a picture. In the second shot we see that the background has changed, and we see a very slight flash hitting Anna. We think that this flash is produced by the camera but when the photographer kneels to take a second picture there is no flash at all, yet we hear the camera make the same noise as before. We may conclude from this that the flash has nothing to do with the camera and is instead an expressionistic visual element which accentuates the cut and indicates the start of Anna's breakdown. Immediately after the flash Anna closes her eyes and shakes her head a little. After the second photo she doesn't react at all. It seems like the flash affects her and sets in motion her breakdown to come. What is further noteworthy is that when Sean is photographed there is very clear and bright flash visible from the camera. The film thus seems to suggest that Sean, or what Sean has done to Anna (his actions), play a significant part in her emotional breakdown through the odd visual cue of a flash.

We should also draw attention to the significance of the beach as a location where the ending of the film takes place. Michael Walker points out in his book *Endings in the Cinema* that the beach ending is a recurring cinematic motif loaded with different kinds of symbolisms.

Walker mentions that one of the most recurring features of the beach ending is to serve as a signpost for renewal (138). The vastness of the beach and the coming and going of the waves could be seen as a visual motif which cleanses the characters. It is striking for instance that the intense music during this final scene eventually fades away and that we are left with the soothing sounds of the waves, suggesting a kind of healing process is taking place. What is furthermore noteworthy is that the therapeutic location of the beach is initiated by the final line of Sean's voice-over: "I guess I see you in another lifetime". This remark may be seen as a cynical joke but his sincerity in tone of voice and the editing suggest that this other lifetime may begin on this beach. The title of the film also interestingly stresses the idea of a new beginning. At first the title seems to refer to the possible rebirth in the film. But why isn't the film then called rebirth? The title *Birth* indicates a new beginning, a new life. For a film that centralizes its conflict around mourning and reincarnation, and how mourning can be experienced as a cycle repeating itself, it is striking that the title of the film does not reflect this circular nature but instead hints at the emergence of something new. We can thus see her breakdown at the end not as a crisis but rather as a cathartic, liberating and ultimately productive moment with regards to her grieving process. The only real suggestion that the film gives us which might explain Anna's breakdown at the beach as a new start for her is the disruptive narrative that Sean provided Anna. The film thus suggests that Sean's actions had a significant part to play to create this cathartic and liberating ending for Anna.

What sets Sean apart from the archetype of the evil child most prominently is his ambiguousness. Where most evil children can be rationalized by supportive supernatural narratives, we fail to grasp Sean and are left with more questions than answers. Since the evil child is seen as a child figure who is robbed of agentic powers, as voiced by Renner, our inability to make sense of Sean suggests that the disturbing child might yield greater agentic capabilities. Through close observation it becomes clear that Sean utilizes his agency by aiding Anna in constructing a disruptive narrative around her late husband. By showing up in her life and claiming to be a reincarnation Sean is making clear to Anna that her Sean did not love her anymore. He does not just achieve this by literally telling her that he can't be her husband because he loves her but also by letting her experience breaking up with her former husband. Anna never got to experience her husband breaking up with her, and Sean is allowing her to experience this by saying to her that he isn't Sean. At the end of the film, we can see the effects of this narrative implantation where Anna does not seem to be going through a mourning crisis but is rather coming to grips with the fact that her late husband didn't love her anymore.

Through Nagel and Hornsby we can make the distinction between social agents and actions produced by those agents. At the end of the film, it is suggested through visual clues that Sean's actions still influence Anna and that what he did to her plays a significant role in her emotional breakdown. And this act of Sean, to disrupt the image of a loving husband for Anna, is partially made possible by his ambiguous nature. For Sean sits at the intersection of the past and the present which makes him a confusing character, both to those around him and to himself. He brings back someone from the past but at the same time is physically there in the present. And his actions both affect Anna when he is physically present but also when he is not, further adding to his complex temporal dimension. This temporal confusion allows Sean to bring back the past but also to re-enact an un-lived experience from the past for Anna. Through Sean she is able to experience the break-up she never got to experience. But since Sean is always accompanied by the absence of Anna's late husband, Sean's absence from Anna's life becomes significant. For the film suggests that even when Sean is absent from Anna's life at the end of the film that he is still capable of emotionally affecting her. Sean thus ultimately demonstrates that the disturbing child is able to act because of its ambiguous qualities.

CONCLUSION

The disturbing children we have encountered throughout our discussion are above all unexplainable. We don't have access to their motivations, are left in the dark whether we should sympathize or antagonize them and are often clueless how to interpret their actions. We observe the cruel mistreatment of the Eichwald children in *The White Ribbon* but still have doubts about their status as innocent victims. And we are completely in the dark when it comes to Sean's reincarnation claim in *Birth*; is he making it up or is he dead serious? The disorientating quality that these children have unsettle us and ultimately leave us disturbed. But even though these children exist in a foggy landscape where nothing seems certain, we can still pin down and grasp a part of their nature. Under close inspection it becomes apparent that the disturbing child displays a significant amount of agency, even though this is not clearly evident when we first encounter them. The most important question that arises from this observation is why the agentic powers of the disturbing child matter. What does it mean that they have agency? A comparison between the disturbing child and the way more popular and familiar evil child reveals that where the former displays agency, the latter clearly does not. The supernatural narrative structure which encapsulates and brings into existence the evil child also frames this evil archetype as an innocent figure without agency, drawing inspiration from a rich and expansive historical past of innocent child conceptions. But when this coherent narrative backbone disappears, as is the case with the disturbing child, it becomes interesting to ponder over the effects of this on childhood agency.

I have developed the argument that ambiguous characteristics provide the disturbing child with agency. The Eichwald children and Sean acquire their agency through their ambiguity in different ways. In *The White Ribbon* the children's ambiguousness is upheld by their innocent status as victims of parental abuse and the possibility of their suspicious involvement with a series of gruesome crimes. We have observed that in a few instances, when the children have taken refuge from the dominant adult gaze, they express themselves through actions of curiosity. Not only can we see their secretive actions as a way to escape the harsh treatment of their parents, but their curiosity also functions as an exploration of their ambiguousness. Since their curiosity strengthens both their innocence as well as their suspiciousness and thus contributes to their ambiguousness, the film suggests that their actions are instigated by this ambiguity. The social framework of the risk society frames the curiosity of the children as an exercise in risk management, by pursuing their curiosity outside of the adult gaze they evade and hence manage the risk they face. By framing the children as social

actors who engage in risk management the film is further cementing their ambiguous position. For risk management is rarely associated with childhood, children are either at risk or create risk, which means that we can see the depiction of risk management by the children in the film as ambiguous and hence in service of the children's agency.

In *Birth* Sean's ambiguousness is not constructed around the tension between innocence and danger, but rather around the conflicting combination of past and present. His reincarnation claim, whether true or false, not only draws attention to the present-day reality of a ten-year-old boy making that claim but also functions as a signpost of the past life of Anna's late husband. Sean is continually accompanied and defined by the disorienting and ambiguous relationship between the past and the present. This is visually represented in the film by often leaving Sean out of the frame, but it is also emphasized through Sean's actions. In the most crucial scene of the film Sean reveals to Anna the truth about her former husband being a cheater. He not only does this by expressing *his* love for her, and thereby saying that the other Sean didn't love her, but also by (unconsciously) placing Anna in the position to experience a break-up in order for her to recognize the abandonment of her former husband. Sean's ambiguity makes his actions in the present function revelatory for the past, thus stressing that it proves productive for his agency. When we frame Sean's agency as an effort to help Anna disrupt the stable narrative that existed around her late husband, we can interpret the ending of the film as emotionally working through the realization that her late husband was in love with someone else. By seeing Sean's actions as separate from himself we can assert that at the end of the film it is suggested that Anna is still being affected by the aftermath of those actions and thus play a vital role in her breakdown.

I have thus argued that the disturbing child acquires agency through its ambiguous characteristics. One of the more interesting revelations that we can take away from this argument is that the ambiguous nature of childhood can be productive and positive. The idea that children are becoming more estranged and difficult to decipher is seen as something which we should try to prevent from happening, especially from the point of view of parents who would like to have a firm grasp on their children. But our discussion and analysis has shown that ambiguous qualities can empower children by granting them agency. Further research could be done to explore how cinematic representations might contribute to the idea that ambiguity and uncertainty might be productive forces. This doesn't necessarily have to concern the relationship between ambiguity and childhood but could instead be approached from a broader perspective on ambiguity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, Richard. *Mourning Films: A Critical Study of Loss and Grieving in Cinema*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012.
- Balanzategui, Jessica. *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema: Ghosts of Futurity at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
- Carleton, Nicholas R.. “Fear of the unknown: One fear to rule them all”. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, Vol.41, 2016.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, University of California Press, 1979.
- & Christopher Pierson. *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford University Press, 1991.
- “Risk and Responsibility”. *The Modern Law Review*, Vol.62, No.1, 1999.
- Goldie, Peter. *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*, Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Heywood, Colin. *Childhood in Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Higgins, Kathleen. “Aesthetics and the Containment of Grief”. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 78, No.1, 2020.
- Hornsby, Jennifer. “Agency and Alienation”. *Naturalism in Question*, Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Jackson, Stevi & Sue Scott. “Risk Anxiety and the Social Construction of Childhood”. *Risk and Sociocultural Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- James, Allison. “Agency”. *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Jenks, Chris. *Childhood*, Routledge, 2005.
- Lennard, Dominic. *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors: The Child Villains of Horror Film*, State University of New York Press, 2014.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Prout, Alan. *The Future of Childhood*, Routledge, 2004.

- Ratcliffe, Matthew & Eleanor A. Byrne. "Grief, self and narrative". *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action*, Vol.25, No.3, 2022.
- Renner, Karen J.. *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Stout, Jeroen. "Michael Haneke over Das Weisse Band: Onder het tapijt kijken". *Filmkrant*, 2009. <https://filmkrant.nl/interview/michael-haneke-over-das-weisse-band/>
- Uprichard, Emma. "Children as 'Beings and Becomings': Children, Childhood and Temporality". *Children & Society*, Vol.22, No.4, 2008.
- Valentine, Kylie. "Accounting for Agency" *Children & Society*, Vol.25, No.5, 2011.
- Walker, Michael. *Endings in the Cinema: Thresholds, Water and the Beach*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Wandless, William. "Spoil the Child: Unsettling Ethics and the Representation of Evil". *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol.22, No.2, 2011.
- Wood, Robin. *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, Festival of Festivals, 1979.
- "The White Ribbon' Examines Roots of Nazism". *The Tufts Daily*, 2010.
<https://www.tuftsdaily.com/article/2010/01/the-white-ribbon-examines-roots-of-nazism#:~:text=%27The%20White%20Ribbon%27%20examines%20the,is%20simultaneously%20bleak%20and%20beautiful.>
- Zhao, Guoping. "The Modern Construction of Childhood: What Does It Do to the Paradox of Modernity?". *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol. 30, 2011.

FILMOGRAPHY

- The Bad Seed*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy, Warner Bros., 1956.
- Birth*. Directed by Jonathan Glazer, New Line Cinema, 2004.
- The Brood*. Directed by David Cronenberg, New World Pictures, 1979.
- The Changeling*. Directed by Peter Medak, Chessman Park Productions, 1980.
- The Exorcist*. Directed by William Friedkin, Warner Bros., 1973.
- Halloween*. Directed by John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.
- The Others*. Directed by Alejandro Amenábar, Dimension Films, 2001.
- Pan's Labyrinth*. Directed by Guillermo Del Toro, Estudios Picasso, 2006.
- Ringu*. Directed by Hideo Nakata, Ringu/Rasen Production Committee, 1998.
- The Shining*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick, Warner Bros., 1980.
- The Sixth Sense*. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan, Hollywood Pictures, 1999.
- Village of the Damned*. Directed by Wolf Rilla, Metro-Goldywn-Mayer, 1960.
- The White Ribbon*. Directed by Michael Haneke, Wega Film X Filme, 2009.