From raped childhood to ruined childhood: Developing an aesthetic of childhood trauma in digital culture from 2001 to 2018

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Abstract
This article examines the development of the ruined childhood genre of online comedy from 2001 to the early to mid 2010s. This cross-media genre of Internet humour hinges on the corruption of sites of American childhood media for the nostalgic, often white, masculinist coded, adult fan. This subject is explored with the intention of understanding how an aesthetic of exaggerated negative affect is both identified and expressed within a parodic online context, before situating such performances within wider systems of power, commercial identity and nationalism. This is identified as a percussor to later media panics surrounding ‘cancel culture’ and childhood media. The article then explains how an analogue aesthetic of disrupted nostalgia can be analysed and understood through Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher’s theory of hauntology. Key examples in the explored in the article include the Photoshop contests on Something Awful, Cracked Listicles, and Creepypasta lost episodes.

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Introduction: Aims, objectives and positionality

This article examines the development of the ruined childhood genre of online comedy from 2001 to the early to mid 2010s. This cross-media genre of Internet humour hinges on a performative outrage surrounding the corruption of sites of American childhood media for the nostalgic, often white, masculinist coded, adult fan. The subject is explored with the intention of understanding how a parodic aesthetic of childhood trauma is both identified and expressed within a humorous online context, before situating such performances within wider systems of power, commercial identity and nationalism.

The first section considers the performatively traumatised fandom of 2000s to early 2010s white masculinist coded Internet comic culture, with the intention of understanding why these users chose to appropriate the language of sexual violence and childhood trauma to express their own anti-fandom experiences. This will be understood through the raped childhood rhetoric of dissatisfied fans of the Star Wars and Indiana Jones sequels, the community comedy and participatory engagements with ruined childhood themes in the early 2000s forums of Something Awful, and finally through the anxiety of aging expressed in the nostalgic and performatively pained
listicles of the *Cracked Web* site in the early 2010s.

In the second section, the visual language of ruined childhood is considered through examples of *Creepypasta* lost episodes: online horror stories told through the medium of familiar childhood screen media. Here the nostalgic subject is returned to analogue style image making, which is analysed and understood through Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher’s theory of hauntology, with the intention of understanding how the aesthetic of technological affect may enable such ruined childhood styles of nostalgia themed horror.

This research is undertaken with the aim of understanding the questions: What does it mean to divorce childhood from its material realities, and towards a commercial product for adults to consume and criticise? Whose childhood is privileged and how did this model of humour predict later media panics in the late 2010s and early 2020s surrounding childrens media and ‘cancel culture’? And finally, how can technological imaging project and invent uniquely horrific visions of childhood media nostalgia?

Such questions are useful for understanding the community participation inherent in this affective performance. For, as Melissa Click identifies in her study of anti-fandom, “One of fan studies’ enduring strengths is its focus on and valuation of affect, particularly its emphasis on fans’ positive feelings of like and love. Yet examined less frequently are the equally intense, but opposite, feelings of dislike and hatred” (Click, 2019). These are feelings which are often intertwined to ruling powers of oppression such as misogyny, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, transmisogyny, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and anti-Black and anti-Asian racism, and are empowered and accelerated via digital platforms of expressions. Whilst, this study’s focus on the shifting relationships with pop cultural texts for ageing fans, contributes to an additionally under researched area of study, with C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby identifying life-course studies of fandom as “an important next step within fan studies”.

To conflate the act of American pop cultural consumption with the profound trauma of child sexual abuse (CSA) is a contentious, and arguably deeply offensive, claim. Certainly, the childhood of these individuals are not literally, or figuratively, raped or ruined. The expression is instead used to express hyperbole and parody for a select group of individuals whose childhoods were immersed in American media, and have retained these connections of these childhood media into their teens and adulthood. It would be reasonable, though not universally correct, to assume that the intended audience for such strands of humour are those of privilege, and may not have experienced life-shattering trauma personally. Yet, as both a CSA survivor myself, and as someone who works with children, young people and adults with complex trauma and mental health struggles, I would argue that it is deeply rewarding for researchers within the fields of trauma theory, affect theory, childhood studies, comedy studies and digital media studies to engage with such arguably poor taste incarnations of this taboo theme. By rendering CSA as an unspeakable and invisible subject it is inevitable that its manifestations in mass culture are crudely drawn and intentionally aggravating. But such examples are not simply grotesque outliers but rather revealing cultural manifestations. For as Sigmund Freud outlines in ‘Jokes and their relation to the unconscious’ (1905), the study of comedy is the study of violence. Simply because I do not personally find these examples funny, or presume for them to resonate or relate with the reader, does not mean that they are not worthy of study within academia.

As my own examples are limited in place and time, and given the multiplicity of crises facing young people today, it would be reasonable to attribute this model of pop cultural engagement to a select group of privileged gen xers and millennials in the global north, cloistered from the later realities of climate catastrophe, the COVID pandemic and child poverty that particularly wounded later generations. However, this would be too simplistic a generalisation, the pleasure of engaging in corrupted or reworked models of childhood nostalgia extends beyond this one niche demographic. For example, as an educator myself, a particularly popular creative writing activity for year eight students (those aged between 12 and 13) is to rewrite a children’s television character into a Gothic horror story; here blood thirsty spectres of Peppa Pig and Patrick Star abound.

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Section one: Performatively traumatised fandom in 2000s to early 2010s white masculinist Internet comic cultures
‘To this day, the scars of Lidsville run deep through American society,’ Kreutz said. ‘Remember, approximately 40 million Americans were exposed to this show as children, so we’re talking about a mass, televised trauma whose psychological ramifications continue to weigh heavily on our collective national psyche.’

In 1999, a team of UCLA psychologists compiled a ranking of lingering childhood traumas among Americans between the ages of 30 and 40. Lidsville ranked second overall, just ahead of the Child Catcher from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and Sigmund & The Sea Monsters, another Krofft program. Ranked first were the Oompa-Loompas from Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory.

‘Area 36-year-old still has occasional Lidsville nightmare,’ The Onion.

Performative cultures of traumatised white masculinist American and British fandom far precede the Internet. For example, fans of the British science fiction series Dr. Who speaking of the transition from the fourth doctor (Tom Baker, 1974–1981) to the fifth doctor (Pete Davison, 1982–1984) describe how: “my fellow fanboys retain deep scars from what they call, perfectly straight-faced, a trauma”[6]. Whilst, one 1991 study, which collected thirty-something fans’ memories of watching Batman during their 1960s childhood, noted “a more reactionary response” to nostalgia that resulted in “an attempt to police contemporary children’s culture and to regulate popular pleasures” by using “the 1960s series as the yardstick for what would constitute a more innocent style of entertainment”[7].

Yet, within digital cultures these performances of harm rise to further extremes. Within the context of the trauma of CSA, it is noteworthy that the original incarnation of this expression was not ‘ruined childhood’ but ‘raped my childhood’ an intentionally outrage-inducing, CSA-inflected phrase that is defined by the Urban Dictionary as:

A melodramatic expression that is used by oversensitive millennials who become unduly upset when certain media properties that they enjoyed as children are co-opted in ways that they do not personally approve of, and who would tastelessly and obtusely draw upon associations with child rape in order to scorn and rebuke — as something akin to sex offenders — those who would co-opt their beloved media properties for financial gain.

The sentiment that is associated with the expression is, itself, the result of having spent one’s childhood being molly-coddled by child-worshiping adults, and thus having become abused of the ridiculous notion that since one was regarded as sacred when he or she was a child, anything that one associates with his or her childhood is therefore also sacred. [8]

This raped/ruined childhood model serves as a particularly lurid example of professor of childhood studies, Dan Cook’s (2001) scholarship into how “[American] children’s culture has become virtually indistinguishable from consumer culture over the course of the last century” and acts as a “key arena for the formation of the sense of self”[9]. In this system where “childhood and consumer capitalism inform and co-create each other”, such commercial texts appropriates “the realization and expression of self — and fuses it with ... the production of goods, services and media in an impersonal market.”[10] Here as Benjamin Barber explains the child is transformed from “self-defined person into market-defined brand ... The boundary separating her [the child] from what she buys vanishes: she ceases to buy goods as instruments of other ends and instead becomes the goods she buys”[11]. Thus, as Cook explains, the outraged adult fan serves as “the living legacies of commodified childhoods gone by.”[12]

Such a literalistic use of the ‘raped childhood’ style of comically tarnished nostalgia can be found in South Park’s
‘The China Probrem’ episode from 2008. Here we find Kyle haunted by his memories of witnessing sexual violence against a loved one. Against a dramatic soundtrack reminiscent of a television soap opera, and with exaggerated, sombre emphasis, he says to Stan, “I dream about it every night. Every time I close my eyes, I see us just running away, running while they rape him over and over again.” [13] The next time we see Kyle he is experiencing traumatic night terrors, twisting his body back and forth in bed and screaming, “No, wait. No, we have to stop them! They're raping him. Rape!” [14] What is this terrifying flashback that has caused such psychic pain? Who has been hurt so badly that Kyle now relives it so vividly in his nightmares? We quickly find out, it’s Indiana Jones, the ‘rape’ being Indiana Jones and the Kingdom Crystal Skull, the 2008 sequel to the beloved 1980s film trilogy. Kyle sits in horror at the movie theatre, an unwilling witness to this crime, exclaiming “they’re just taking Indiana Jones and they’re ... they’re raping him! ... Why would Spielberg and Lucas do this?!” [15]

Stan, Clyde and Jimmy, who were also at ‘the scene of the crime’ are similarly tortured, as Jimmy laments to Stan, “I thought I could go on like before. But after seeing Indiana get raped, I know I’ll never be the same. Do you remember that scene with Indiana in the refrigerator? It didn’t make any sense, Stan.” [16]

This is ruined childhood nostalgia as a comical reworking of CSA, where the nostalgic film director is refashioned as a rapist, in order to re-centre the importance of collective popular culture over an individual personal life in the creation and maintenance of innocence. Here one’s childhood rape does not occur in childhood, nor is it the rape of an individual child, but rather this violence is executed in adulthood towards a cultural childhood text several decades old. This inverts the traditional CSA system of an adult survivor looking back at childhood trauma. Rather, this raped childhood vision features no actual children at all. Instead, we find the adult experiencing this act of childhood rape, through looking forward at the fearful future of their beloved franchises.

In this system, the rape does not occur to the pop culture consumer; Kyle is not haunted by his own trauma. Instead, he is witnessing the violence inflicted upon his dear friend, Indiana Jones. This childhood is no longer held within the body of an actual child, for those watching these remakes decades after the originals often cannot claim to be children anymore. Instead, childhood is embodied in characters and codes as an object that can be taken from them and violated in front of them. This inverts the anti-cute structure where a young person might seek out the death and destruction of their objects of innocence as an affirmation of their adolescence. Rather, this is a system where adults cling to their childhood symbols, hoping they will not be taken from them by another adult.

Such extremes of expression can be located within what Sarah Schulman identifies as the “current discourse of overreaction”, where terminology of abuse and violence are stretched to include the most tenuous of uneasy or uncomfortable feelings (Schulman, 2016) [17]. Here exaggerated victim status is embraced by already privileged groups who have existing “expectations that their complaints will be heard”, even when executed in a tongue in cheek manner, to implement visions of safety that are at the expense of other’s rights, well-being and personal well-being [18]. Of course, in the case of Indiana Jones this is not a literal threat, but rather a metaphorical one, yet Schulman’s framework is nevertheless a useful for exploring the ruined childhood genre, with the writer identifying that:

Sometimes invoking the language of abuse is an avoidance of responsibility, just like speaking in metaphors. Like when people say, “I feel like I’ve been raped,” to mean they are upset. In reality, what they feel is nothing like what they would feel if they’d been raped. It’s a turn of phrase that means they don’t like what is happening and don’t know how to make it better. It’s an overstatement of harm using Abuse tropes. And sometimes we are so insistent on our right to overstate that we do things that are not merited by the actual dimensions of the conflict. [19]

Possibly the earliest example of this genre of pop cultural outrage through digitally mediated traumatic expressions can be traced to the online petition ‘Peter Jackson to Write and Direct Star Wars Episode III’ in December 2001. Here former fans took to the Internet to rally against ‘abusers’ Lucas and Spielberg, garnering 7,487 signatures of support. The petition’s statement reads:
To: Star Wars
We hereby, the undersigned, in spirit of our raped childhood’s [sic], ask that George Lucas give over his reign as director and writer of Episode III to one Peter Jackson. To allow complete control of all necessary story lines and dialogue for Peter Jackson to make a film as he sees fit. [20]

Such ‘trauma’ relating to rebooted childhood classics even resulted in a ‘Raped childhood support group’ in the 2003 Star Wars community forums, on the ‘traumatic’ impact of the Star Wars prequels (Figure 1) [21]. The style is akin to the early consciousness-raising feminist advocacy groups surrounding rape and sexual violence. These humorously literal evocations of the CSA survivor as adult, white, American male pop culture consumer continue the model of capitalist disenfranchisement identified within the digital subcultural significance of Pedobear [22]. The language of CSA and the politics of consumer identity intersect, both creating their childhood, in the Hollywood franchise, and the subsequent online fandoms built around this media, and taking it away, in unwanted (but often financially successful) reboots.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the ‘Raped childhood support group’ posted on a Star Wars community message board by user Obi-Ewan, 12 December 2003.

Thus, serving as an exaggerated example of Angela Davis’ argument that:

The commodity has penetrated every aspect of people’s lives all over the world in ways that have no historical precedent. The commodity — and capitalism in general — has insinuated itself into structures of feeling, into the most intimate spaces of people’s lives. [23]

This provides a violently imagined example of Lauren Berlant’s (2004) conception of the nostalgically embedded fantasy of “the American way of life”, which hinges on the “manufactures of public opinion” for the production of their self-expression as citizens ([24]. In this “patriotic public sphere” of the “right-national culture industry” “identity is marketed in national capitalism as a property. It is something you can purchase, or purchase a relation to” [25]. This can explain the exaggerated fantasy of “the inner child of national culture” that is in need of constant protection from violent threat of outside agents [26].
Given the off-puttingly explicit allusion to CSA, the genre developed from raped childhood to the more publicly palatable ruined childhood, with *Something Awful*, an American comic site and forum community, using this term for *Photoshop* contests as early as 2002. The site encouraged users to ruin beloved childhood images by turning them into objects of sexual innuendo on *Photoshop*, with the “related affordance of modifiability allow[ing] for the collective repurposing of existing materials” [27]. This was part of a longer tradition of the forum, with their ‘Photoshop Phriday’ events including altering classic movie posters, and even resulted in the creation of the *Creepypasta* character Slender Man in 2009.

Reworking classic childrens book covers to centre such CSA-related themes as NAMBLA and child sex abduction (Figure 2), the *Something Awful* users “wield[ed] their copies of *Photoshop* with merciless intent to maim, subvert and twist any available images into sexual innuendos and jokes revolving around paedophilia” [28]. Other *Photoshop* additions that ‘ruin’ the images included transmisogynistic, ableist and homophobic jokes, as well as topical humour on Osama Bin Laden and broadly morbid humour.
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Much like the ‘Raped childhood support group’ of the Star Wars forums, the ruined childhood images of Something Awful are imbued with the performed psychological pain of their reception, with the final sentence of the Photoshop roundup being: “This has been an interesting experience for me and I will be contacting all the contributors shortly concerning the fees they owe me for setting back my therapy course by at least six weeks.” [29] Similar to Kyle’s South Park soap opera story of criminal retribution for Indian Jones’ rape, the trauma in the act of witnessing the ruined childhood text is an essential part of the humour. This is reflective of both the pleasures and pain of comically tarnished childhood nostalgia, where the nostalgic man may be both abuser and survivor in the creation of these comical images.

As the ruined childhood genre grew in popularity, its examples continued to develop in range and genre. From disheartening fan theories intended to dramatically change the tone of 1990s and 2000s nostalgic subjects such as Rugrats, Friends and Harry Potter, to throwaway sexual innuendo images of children’s cartoons to be shared and spread on micro-blogging sites such as tumblr, to the in-depth essays of the Journal of Cartoon Over-Analyzations, in a space as wide-ranging and multimedia as the Internet, there was a variety of ways in which your childhood could be ruined [30]. The traditional vision of the aged CS abuser trawling the Internet for his next victim is no longer required; here innocence can be taken away on a peer-to-peer basis.

A popular style of the ruined childhood genre in American online publishing in the early 2010s was the listicle, where a user was able to scroll through such offerings as ‘17 images that will ruin your childhood’, ‘24 facts that will ruin your childhood’ and ‘7 staples of your childhood that we’re about to ruin for you’ on Web sites such as Cracked (2005–present), an American comedy Web site aimed at young men and led by forum posters [31]. Wired argued in 2011 that Cracked “raised the listicle to an art form”, creating “comedy gold” and “compulsively clickable” posts [32]. Emphasising that the secret to these listicles’ success relies on nostalgia, Wired notes that Cracked chooses to “run, [not] walk, down memory lane”, explaining that “some of the best [Cracked] articles take your favorite memories from childhood, be it toys or cartoons, and add a hilarious twist” [33]. With a tongue-in-cheek self-awareness, one ruined childhood listicle entitled ‘5 fan theories about cartoons that will ruin your childhood’ opens with, “A hundred years ago, ‘ruining your childhood’ meant forcing you to work in a mine at age 5. Now it’s finding out that Shaggy is a stoner, or that Mario is hooked up on psychedelics, or that ALF...”[29] This presents a comically fragile, consumption-driven childhood which is at the mercy, not of caregivers, but of movie producers and children’s book authors.

This is reflective of the “complex narrative of nostalgia and futurology” that is present when considering childhood subjects in digital spaces [35]. Though generally located in anxieties around child abuse images and/or young people viewing pornography, the ruined childhood genre illustrates how such fears extend to wider online engagements with childhood media. The “harmless pleasures” of an idealised off-line period are contrasted with a presumption of the sexual violence and sexual perversity of the digital [36]. Thus, “fears of a paedophile gaze — and the possibility that, at least, potentially, someone, somewhere is looking at images of young people in the ‘wrong’ way”, extend beyond the question of which images of children constitute child abuse images or what young people, particularly young boys, are viewing online [37]. Rather, under the ruined childhood lens, not only are “all images of children potentially pornographic”, all childhood-associated media in the realm of the digital is identified as child abuse also [38].

Though created for capitalist profit, any suggestion that these cultural products are impure, i.e., tainted by corporate interest, is worthy of ruined childhood status. “Jesus, people, does everything have to be done on an assembly line? Are we all nothing but mechanized puppets, controlled by some corporation?” cries out one ruined childhood Cracked piece by Jason Pargin [39]. Reminiscent of the disdain for ‘old media’ and ‘crude commercialism’ found in Encyclopedia Dramatica, the ruined childhood genre mourns the evils of corporations as against the innocence of youth. The victims are lamented as:
All of those long-haired teenage kids in their bedrooms, lip-syncing the songs into a mirror and working out their angst, all wearing black Metallica T-shirts that represent one row on some merchandising executive’s *Excel* spreadsheet. [40]

Change, as in the case of the reviled reboot, is traumatic, but so is the passage of time itself, especially in the accelerated space of the digital, where the passing of each day can be scrutinised and surveyed. In one *Cracked* article divided into what ‘The child saw’ and what this has been ‘Ruined by’, the horror hinges on the fact that the ruggedly masculine icons of their 1980s and 1990s youth, such as the Beastie Boys, Nirvana’s Krist Novoselic, Guns ‘N’ Roses Axl Rose, Metallica and Arnold Schwarzenegger, have visibly aged. The author grapples with the disillusioning realisation “that in the very foreseeable future, long before the world is full of robots and flying cars, the Terminator is going to die of old age.” [41]

The particular model of white masculinist American nostalgia expressed through the ruined childhood model is distinct in its status as defenders of a golden age of powerful male action heroes and innocent young children. In extreme emotional expression, situated in some instance, within broader ableist, transmisogynistic and homophobic humour, such models of fan cultures elect themselves as defenders of a childhood innocence that is both defined and centred within their own limited world experience. Here the integrity of childhood media materialises in the disturbing image of a figurative body of a child who is vulnerable to sexually abuse from outside agents. Whilst, the specific coordinates of these nostalgic examples, which centres largely around mid to late twentieth century American pop culture, and emerged in the early 2000s, provides a vivid example of Svetlana Boym’s observation that the nostalgic is an “incurable modern condition. The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia” [42]. For as Henry Jenkins stresses, “there is nothing timeless and unchanging about [fandom] culture; fandom originates in response to” [43].

Here, the ruined childhood genre serves as a pre-cursor to future, digitally enabled moral panics on the reworking, censoring and critical reassessment of long-standing commercial characters, childhood media, children’s authors, toys and children’s television shows, created by right wing media organisations such as the *Times* and Fox News [44]. Sites of panic for ‘cancelled childhood’ have included, but are not limited, to: Mr Potato Head, the works of Dr. Seuss, J. K. Rowling, Enid Blyton, Dav Pilkey, Kate Clanchy, The Muppets and the legacy of Roald Dahl. In this particular point in time, the 2010s to 2020s, the need for diverse children’s media is being increasingly met in creative and exciting ways in YA and children’s publishing. Awareness and advocacy for the needs of trans and non-binary and young people grows under an increasingly aggressive and regressive climate. Whilst social media is providing a platform for the often ignored issues of ableism and audism against disabled children and young people, and anti-racist campaigns against anti-Black, anti-Asian and anti-Semitic tropes in children’s media are beginning to be addressed. Under this landscape, new backlashes for the integrity of American and British children’s media form.

Certainly, such conflicts are not new, with the history of childhood existing in tandem to histories of oppression, with cultural examples such as W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Brownies’ Book* (1920–1921) serving as a vivid historical example of the necessity of children’s media as a platform for the empowerment of the oppressed. Whilst, as Robin Bernstein highlights, because “the culture of childhood so often retains and repurposes that which has elsewhere become abject or abandoned, the study of childhood radically challenges many established historical periodizations” and can thus unearth histories of oppression that are deeply buried within the world of respectable adult media [45]. This is complicated further by the fact that the nostalgic engagement adults have with such texts can both bury and “mystify” the oppressive ideologies located within them, subsequently dislocating their own consumer identities [46].

Thus, it is worth considering whose childhood is being ruined in such pop cultural shifts, and how these specifics reveal how existing constructs of childhood media alienates, excludes, demonises and disempowers literal children and young people. This works in favour of adults, privileged by age, access to platforms of expression and proximity to ruling systems of power as a result of cisgender and heteronormative identity, race, class, nation, class and able bodied and neurotypical experience. As Bernstein highlights the myth of white childhood innocence can be cannily wielded as a justification for racist oppression [47]. Here, the ruined childhood genre serves not just as an artefact of comic online cultural history, but as a warning of nostalgia as a potential weapon to wield in conservative cultural discourse. For as Phillip Nel, notes, “the lie of cancel culture depends upon
nostalgia”, most notably a nostalgia for a vision of pop cultural nationalism that rests on an uncritical and idealised narrative of American history [48]. It’s particularly notable that many examples of ‘cancelled childhood’ lie within the post-war period of the American 1950s, an era which commonly “stands out as the golden age of American childhood [which] serves as the yardstick against which all subsequent changes in childhood are measured” [49]. Thus, supporting Joseph L. Zornado’s argument of how “adult nostalgia for childhood [often] carries a latent relational narrative between adult and child that justifies adult domination” [50].

This is reflective of Sara Ahmed’s argument that emotions, including but not limited to nostalgia and outrage, are “investments in social norms” that are “bound up with the securing of social hierarchy” [51]. Here, the threat of the imagined Other taking away a group’s pop culture childhood, draws revealing parallels to Ahmed’s analysis of the affective bonds of anti-immigration fears, which operates on the rhetoric that the Other “threatens to take something away from the subject” and “to take the place of the subject”, and is thus “a threat to the object of love.” [52] This is revelatory of the “transmission of affect” in the sphere of digital enabled nostalgia, with such spaces producing rather than merely platforming such performances of trauma [53]. As “there is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the environment” in such examples, it is not as simple as one person uploading their memories of Mr. Potato Head to an online environment, feeling rage at the discovery of its shifting brand identity, and consequently sharing it with a sympathetic online community [54]. Rather, such mass mediated environments create these collective affects through the delusion of an individually constructed childhood self.

Such an intentionally provocative environment has an immersive impact, transmitting such inflammatory rhetoric and affects through an assurance that an existing emotional connection with this iconography is already present. So, in short, you did not necessarily need to have owned a Mr. Potato Head in your childhood, or possess any sentimental memories about these figures to have this affect transmitted to you. Certainly, such pre-existing history with the material, as well as individual’s proximity to ruling systems of power, aids this model’s effectiveness but it is not essential. However, it is the attempt to guard against negative affects of the childhood self by making, “the Western individual especially more concerned with securing a private fortress, personal boundaries, against the unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other” that ironically causes the ruined childhood psyche to take hold [55].

Section two: Lost episodes and Creepypasta of the late 2000s to early 2010s

An alternative manifestation to such tensions of an idealised offline childhood, expressed through a digitally mediated present, can be identified in the lost episode style of Creepypasta narration, popular in the late 2000s to early 2010s. These were scary stories, shared online, that retold viewings of mysterious episodes from popular American television channels (Adult Swim, Nickelodeon), chilling ‘lost’ episodes of familiar American children’s cartoons (Spongebob Squarepants, Arthur; Mickey Mouse, Family Guy, Doug, Ed, Edd and Eddy) or a sinister programme from a cosily nostalgic time period in American history (the 1990s, the 1970s). Due to its popularity, it quickly fell into cliché, with the lost episode section of the Creepypasta Wiki now providing the disclaimer that “these pastas have been considered somewhat cliché, and have fallen out of fashion. Please note that the wiki no longer accepts lost episode pastas” [56]. Such self-awareness even appears in the stories themselves, with one author interjecting to assure readers that “please keep in mind that this isn’t one of those cliché lost episode crap stories that has the static and blood and gore” [57].

This ‘static’ is the technological imagining of the lost episode story style, that is emboldened by the uncanny aesthetics of older off-line technology, with such tensions of representation being an integral part of the horror narration. This is a continuation of the conflation between trauma and technology; much like the False Memory Syndrome Foundation likened traumatic memory to a degraded videotape, in the case of the lost episode genre, the trauma quite literally is a degraded or distorted videotape [58]. Author, abuser, event and aesthetic all intertwine. First in the unrepresentable subject of childhood trauma, and later in its mass cultural echoes.

Such distorted examples provide an alternative to the ruined childhood examples provided earlier, which can be identified within Boym’s model of “restorative nostalgia”, that is characterised by “anti-modern myth making”
and can manifest in examples from “conspiracy theories” to “nationalist revivals” [59]. The restorative nostalgic lacks the hauntological imprint, because “it has no use for the signs of historical time patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections” [60]. Instead, the lost episode examples explored here can be positioned within Boym’s theory of “reflective nostalgia” which “cherishes shattered fragments of memories and temporalizes spaces” because “only false memories can be totally recalled” [61].

We can locate the lost episode vision of nostalgic technological trauma within Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds’ theory of hauntology, outlined in Fisher’s *Ghosts of my life* and Reynolds’ *Retromania*. Exploring late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century popular culture through the lens of technology and late capitalist discontent, Reynolds argues that “the memoradelic imprint left by vintage TV on the child’s impressionable grey matter is central to hauntology” [62]. He reasons that “cassettes could be considered a hauntological format because, like the scratches and surface noise on vinyl, the hiss of tape noise reminds you constantly that this is a recording. But cassettes are also a ghost medium in the sense that as far as mainstream culture is concerned, they are dead, an embarrassing relic” [63].

The concept of hauntology was originally created by Jacques Derrida to explore the ‘ghost’ of communism in a post-Soviet world, and its differences to Fisher and Reynolds’ later appropriation of the term has been a point of criticism [64]. Their usage of hauntology to explore “self-conscious, emotionally ambivalent forms of nostalgia that set in play the ghosts of childhood” stands in contrast to Derrida’s own opposition to utopian idealism [65]. Critics such as Andrew Gallix conclude that this later incarnation was functionally useless, not just because it was seen as overly broad, and so over-used that it felt quickly dated, but because “it is itself haunted by a nostalgia for all our lost futures” [66]. However, Reynolds and Fisher’s theory is still a highly relevant one for understanding and analysing the specific example of digitally embedded, analogue aesthetic, CSA-evoking Creepypasta works, with the author’s ‘utopian’ biases in this case reflecting the audience’s own interaction with the VHS subject as a site of digitally mediated, nostalgic childhood trauma.

Such hauntological signs can be clearly applied to the lost episode genre. Recalling watching ‘Dead Bart’ (2010), for example, a harrowing ‘lost’ episode of *The Simpsons*, the writer is keen to emphasise the “very poor quality animation”, drawing parallels to the poor quality of mind a supposedly deranged Matt Groening had when creating this chilling animation [67]. Similarly in one ‘Ed, Edd and Eddy Lost Episode’ the narrator positions the low-quality representation as relative to the high level of horror: the “animation was choppy, sound was constricted and very muffled. Reports of a line running up and down, similar to a crappy VHS tape were received.” [68] Such specifics of technological projection are described in minute detail in order to set the scene of these stories, with the ‘Arthur Lost Episode’ describing in length the fact that “the theme sounding a bit tinny, probably due to bad recording equipment. The tape had issues that troubled me, mainly the tracking. I just couldn’t get it to stop being jumpy and awkward to watch! I eventually gave up, leaving it where there was a line of fuzz across.” [69]

This emotive aesthetic can be contextualised within a longer history of collective engagements with degraded analogue texts. This is most notably found in Todd Haynes’ banned and bootlegged cult classic documentary *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) (Figure 3). In a paper written in 2004, before the creation of YouTube, Lucas Hilderbrand identifies and explores the ‘bootleg aesthetic’ of this film [70]. Due to Haynes’ unauthorised use of The Carpenters’ music, the documentary was forced out of mainstream circulation, with curious viewers reliant on an underground bootleg circuit of pirated VHS tapes to access and enjoy the film, with the text garnering a mythologised, cult status as a result. Due to repeated copies, Hildebrand emphasises how “piracy has altered the text”, with the original 16 mm. film degrading over each transfer, to render the film “historically, perceptually, and emotionally reshaped.” [71] As these replications became the primary mode for audiences to access the text due to its banned status, the ‘bootleg aesthetic’ of the pirated documentary became its original, authentic one. Hildebrand describes watching Haynes’ original 16 mm., observing that he found himself “nostalgic for my warped dub at home. For me, part of the experience was missing.” [72]
Figure 3: Stills from Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (director Todd Haynes, Iced Tea Productions: 1988).

The audience is not just nostalgic for the late singer, but for the technology that conceptualised her imperfect representation. In understanding these engagements, it should be emphasised that The Karen Carpenter Story is a
tragic one, centring around the young, seemingly all-American singer’s premature death aged 32, following her struggle with anorexia. Here the anorexic body, as Hildebrand emphasises, existing in conversation with the physical imprint of HIV and AIDS on 1980s queer America [73]. In the wasted figure of both the VHS medium and its anorexic subject, where “bootleg aesthetics visually and acoustically replicate the psychological and physical trauma experienced by Karen in the narrative”, the deteriorating position of directorial authorship and artistic control is emphasised [74]. This is the contradiction of this “unauthorized star study effectively becom[ing] ‘un-author-ized’ through video reproduction.” [75]

In the same way that the creepypasta lost episodes hinge on interactive storytelling for an existing pop cultural subject, Haynes, in his illicit use of The Carpenters’ material — followed, in turn, by the viewers’ illegal copies of Haynes’ banned documentary — presents “the collective demise of the narrative subject, the author, and the format”. [76] These copies that distort and degrade Haynes’ supposedly original source material were copies of what was already a simulacrum text, made so by its director. This is not only due to the film’s unauthorised usage of commercial music, but in the fact that Karen Carpenter’s story was acted out with customised Barbie dolls and found footage television recordings, a choice that illustrates Haynes’ act of “rendering private play in a public forum.” [77]

Much like Haynes’ film repeatedly shows Karen watching television herself, an audience’s familiarity with American popular culture is essential for engaging with both online lost episodes and the bootleg Superstar with its Barbie dolls and Brady Bunch clips. This is the audience labour time of “fill[ing] in the muffled pop tunes from memory while listening closely to comprehend the garbled dialogue”. [78] Such pop cultural references “do not necessarily refer to specific episodes of sitcoms, but to a general cultural memory of the time”, providing the audience with “a historical distance that can be read nostalgically.” [79] This gestures to what Ann Cvetkovich defines as an “archive of feelings” in queer pop cultural intimacy, where a “public forum” of queer trauma may intertwine with the open space of popular culture to weave new visions into these seemingly worn-out subjects [80]. Thus, just as “trauma resembles gay and lesbian cultures which have had to preserve their histories”, so too does Haynes’ medium of expression, which in its viewership seems constantly on the verge of erasing itself from the archive [81].

This feeds into the existing belief systems surrounding the unseeable nature of traumatic childhood memory. The first-person narration of the lost episodes are all that remains, for as the genre title suggests, the original recordings are ‘lost’: all that remains is their stories. This continues the ambiguity of authorial authenticity in digital meme making, the text is positioned in “earnest narrative” as a “single person’s singular terrifying experience” which exists “as my true story, not our inside joke” [82]. The narrator of the Creepypasta ‘Plankton got served’, which tells the tale of an ill-fated viewing of a morbid Spongebob Squarepants episode, even addresses his status as an unreliable survivor directly in the story:

I know people would fail to believe me. People will accuse me of just trying to scare people. People would say I have no evidence. There are no photos. There is no video evidence of this occurrence. I only saw it once, and it never occurred to me to do such. [83]

So how can this imageless, unrepresentable childhood trauma be represented and received by the audience? Nostalgia is the universal trauma that binds writer and reader. They may not have seen the fictitious lost episode, or experienced this trauma, but it is assumed and asserted that they know the American pop cultural coordinates of its creation and can savour and substitute the horrific mythos it is now injected with. As the ‘Magic School Bus original pilot’ states in its opening, “If you had a childhood, regardless of when you were born, you should remember the cartoon.” [84] Regardless of whether you were there, regardless of whether you experienced it, regardless of whether it happened at all, you are identified as a childhood trauma survivor simply by being alive, by having a past behind you that is presumed to possess the pop culture references ready to be soured in shared memories.

The Creepypasta story ‘Gregory’s room’, which describes a harrowing childhood viewing experience of the programme of the same name, sets the scene in 90s nostalgia, declaring, “I, like many other people I know, am a 90’s kid. I’m pretty sure even adults liked those years too. Video games, simplicity and good TV cartoons.” [85] For it is those ‘good TV cartoons’ which are the heart of this genre, in their endless online remixes as horror. The horror of Gregory’s declaration “No parents. No police. No one can hear you” would not be so potent if it was not
for the knowledge that in the story this fictional programme was shown in the Nickelodeon studios to a group of crying children in the 1990s [86].

Similarly, ‘1999’, a powerful example of hauntology by Camden Lamont, follows a teenager retelling “the infamous channel of my childhood” via a series of blog posts [87]. Starting from the title itself, it is clear that the childhood setting is intrinsic to the horror, with the story beginning “1999 marked the year I lost my first tooth, my first time on a plane, and unfortunately the early loss of my childhood innocence”. [88] This reflects the Creepypasta genre’s position in a much longer history of cultural cut-ups and heteroglossia, continuing the tradition of “storytelling [as] always an act of borrowing from, and then feeding back into, a shared cultural tradition” which is “siphoned off from and then returned to the collective cultural reservoir” [89]. Thus, as Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner explain, “each remix is cobbled together from existing stories, and each has the potential to shape subsequent understanding of existing narratives (that’s the ‘ruined’ in ‘you ruined my childhood’).” [90]

As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin propose, “what is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” [91]. This is evident in Creepypasta writing’s reliance on the off-line genre of American children’s television, but is developed further in its translation into video, with Creepypasta enthusiasts translating popular existing Creepypasta stories into short films to be uploaded onto YouTube (Figure 4). Whilst the original stories hinged on their unseeable nature, their video adaptations are defined by an aesthetic criteria of sound distortions, looping footage, antiquated time stamps, VHS grain, static, tape tracking, tinny records of childhood songs and use (or simulation) of outdated video technology such as Super 8 film. These films either function to corrupt familiar sites of nostalgia, for instance making the familiar site of a Simpsons episode barely visible through tracking, looping and static (Figure 5), or embed an entirely new video or children’s television idea with a familiar simulation of horrific nostalgia. This reflects how “the boundaries between producer, and consumer, private and public are blurring”, with the pop culture consumer turning to pop cultural creator, embedding personal trauma into the seemingly public media of film and television [92].
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Figure 4: Stills from “Mr Bear’s Cellar,” YouTube video inspired by the Creepypasta story “1999”, created by user Fabian Rodriguez, published 7 July 2015, accessed 15 May 2018. Video since removed due to copyright infringement.
Figure 5: Stills from “Dead Bart” video by SuperBobEntertainment, published 4 August 2012 on YouTube, inspired by Creepypasta story “Dead Bart”.
This hauntological styling reflects the fact that “on the Internet the past and present comingle in a way that makes time itself mushy and spongiform” [93]. It can be positioned within YouTube’s existing position as an immersive “anarchive” for nostalgic consumption, where “a high proportion of the content of YouTube is mainstream entertainment and news re-presented, in excerpted form, by its consumers: talk show snippets, period piece tv commercials [and] theme songs” [94]. Such hauntological visions contribute to the non-cinematic status of the lost episode YouTube video translation, putting forward a distinct aesthetic of digitally mediated childhood trauma. Here the “traces, ruined images, left behind by someone’s fascination with a moment” contribute to the sordid ‘labour time’ of childhood trauma implicit in the aesthetic execution [95]. As Mick Katranis, speaking on the impact of analogue technology, asks, “do you like your ghosts to rub up against you?” [96]

Here broader questions of the trauma of childhood for the ‘non-CSA survivor’ are raised, for those who cannot confess to a literal abuse, but still feel the palpable terror of their upbringing. Those who, perhaps, have not experienced a criminal event, but who are haunted by the fears and folklore of childhood. These are the familiar and horrific spaces Linda K. Christian-Smith and Jean I. Erdman analyse in their critical overview of the 1990s childrens horror book series Goosebumps, identifying the “swamp monsters, werewolves, nightmarish summer camps, sinister theme parks and the things in the basement — these are the dark entities and places of many childhoods.” [97] The popular cultural ideas of CSA survivordom can thus be seen as an incarnation of a different kind of horror entirely, a monster-under-the-bed understanding of childhood that exists separate to (but ultimately in conversation with) visions of actual child abuse. This mythos of the horrors of childhood in turn manifests in the accelerated, hyper-visual space of the digital, where any number of horrible videos, blog posts and images are available to view and potentially traumatis the innocent Internet user.

Thus, the childhood trauma aesthetic of the films’ format offers a “significance of presence” in the seemingly ‘non-space’ of the digital, allowing a viewer to ‘feel’ the abuse and the abuser [98]. This reflects the symbolic materiality of the digital, which goes beyond the visual into the imagined realms of taste, smell and touch. The user is provided with an ethically ambiguous “tactile and sensual experience” which utilises traumatic nostalgia as an “invite to expect more closely” [99]. Through the blurring borders between the traumatic and nostalgic within visual culture, a “desire on the part of young people to return to the times of their parents’ generation and their perceived value of coolness” intertwines with the desire for a young person to escape a past trauma caused by the adult hand [100]. The imagery of the cool, the cozy and the criminal all continue to twist together. The status of collector and fan defines the constructed vision of the child abuser aesthetic, unifying both childhood trauma and childhood nostalgia [101]. This extends far beyond the literal borders of CSA and, in the sprawling “anarchive” of the digital, even embodies the Internet itself [102].

Conclusion

This paper considered the anti-fandom act of performative trauma for the ruining of childhood media, first in section one through the collective identity of raped/ruined childhood in parodic digital culture in the early 2000s to early to mid 2010s. Such affective expressions are expressed through hyperbolic upset for changing paths of childhood media franchises (Star Wars, Indiana Jones), obscene doodling and editing of existing childhood images (in the case of Something Awful), and exaggerated outrage at the mere passing of time that leads to the decay of their childhood superheroes (as illustrated by the listicles of Cracked). This study of the outraged ageing fan, can be located within both Click’s 2019 study of anti-fandom and Harrington and Bielby’s 2010 study into the life course studies of fandom. In locating these digital examples within longer cultural histories of childhood, mapped by Zornado, Nel, Mintz and Bernstein, these seemingly crude examples provide a revealing percussor to later media panics surrounding the cancelling of beloved children’s iconography. Whilst, in divorcing childhood from its material realities, and towards a commercial product for adults to not only consume, but aggressively defend, wider questions of whose childhood is privileged and protected are raised.

The ruined childhood examples analysed earlier can be situated within Boym’s model of “restorative nostalgia”, a framework closely tied to conservative visions of nationalist idealism. In contrast, the Creepypasta lost episodes gesture towards Boym’s conception of “restorative nostalgia.” This can be situated within earlier histories on the pleasure and pain of the “bootleg aesthetic”, analysed by Lucas Hildebrand in the queer archival histories of Todd
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Haynes’ *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), and the hauntological theories of Reynolds and Fisher.

Such mass cultural echoes of childhood trauma, gesture both to the disenfranchisement of the literal child, in favour of the adult consumer, and to wider cultural engagements with CSA themes to provoke either horror or laughter in an online audience. Certainly, these examples are not literal crimes against children, but in a world where the reality of childhood abuse is silenced, such outlandish examples are revelatory of its hauntological imprint in digital culture.

About the author

Dr. Bethany Rose Lamont is a writer, lecturer and researcher exploring themes of trauma, mental health and popular culture. Her work has previously been published in *Galactica Media*, *Blind Field Journal*, *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* as well as in the Palgrave Macmillan volume *Discourses of anxiety over childhood and youth across cultures* (edited by Liza Tsaliki and Despina Chronaki). She is the editor in chief and founder of the art and literature journal *Doll Hospital*, and the co-producer of *Sad Girl Cinema*, a feature length documentary on representations of mental health in film and television.

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Notes


2. Click, 2019, pp. 1, pp. 3–4, 6–7, 17.


10. *Ibid*.


13. *South Park*, season 12, episode eight (director Trey Parker, Comedy Central, 8 October 2008); see, for example, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_China_Probrem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_China_Probrem).
A note: Though the framework is incredibly useful when applied to broader questions of dominant group embracing claims of harm and vulnerability to weaponise hurt feelings into state oppression, its real-world application for CSA survivors and those for demonised mental health experiences such as borderline personality disorder is limited. For a more detailed criticism of this text's limits see Aviva Stahl, 2017, “Trust in instinct,” *New Inquiry* (9 May), at https://thenewinquiry.com/trust-in-instinct/, accessed 29 August 2021.


21. “Some viewers of the prequels obviously need help recovering. It seems their childhoods were fairly lackluster [sic] without *Star Wars*. They must not have had many friends, or much of a social life. They must have been abused children, and their only escape was going to the cinema every three years for a *Star Wars* film, which was the high water mark of their youths. How dare Lucas abuse such people as adults by releasing the prequels? Disappointing a few adults is fairly minor compared to ruining the entire lives of people who have done nothing but await the prequels. To hear these fans tell it, the films they had to watch as adults ruined their childhoods. Some have referred to Episode III as ‘Lucas finishes raping my childhood.’ All I can say is, if your youth was so miserable, and your adulthood doesn’t appear to be much better, I’d say you’re better off on the business end of Darth Maul’s saber than sitting in the audience. If you didn’t like the prequels, that’s fine. But if Lucas raped your childhood, then your life must not be worth living.” — Post by Obi-Ewan, ‘Raped childhood support group,’ Jedi Council Forums (12 December 2003), at http://boards.theforce.net/threads/raped-childhood-support-group.14252431/, accessed 16 November 2020.


29. Ibid.


35. Smith, 2015, p. 135.

36. Smith and Attwood, 2013, p. 44.


38. Ibid.


40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Boym, 2001, p. xiii.

43. Jenkins, 1992, p. 3.


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100. Sapio, 2014, p. 44.


102. Reynolds, 2011, p. 27.

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