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 **Whose Fear Is It Anyway?: Moral Panics and “Stranger Danger” in Henry Selick’s *Coraline***

Lindsay Myers

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Whose Fear Is It Anyway?:
Moral Panics and “Stranger Danger” in Henry Selick’s
*Coraline***

Lindsay Myers (bio)

Fears about the welfare and safety of children have long dominated adult conceptions of childhood. Binary oppositions between innocence and experience, autonomy and dependency lie at the heart of modern definitions of childhood and adulthood, and attempts to break free from these essentialist dichotomies have always been fraught with difficulty. The last fifty years have witnessed major advances in the recognition of children's rights throughout the Western world, and it is now widely acknowledged that depriving the young of their civil liberties renders them more susceptible to violence, exploitation, and abuse. Adult fears for child safety and child risk have not, however, dissipated over the course of the last few decades but rather have mutated and developed in accordance with modern advances and scientific progress (Buckingham; Beck; Best; James and Prout; Jenkins; Palmer) and concerns about the perceived menace of pedophilia, child abuse, child pornography, and childhood criminality have led to a veritable escalation in moral panic and anxiety. Progressive policies to empower the young have almost always been accompanied by discourses of protectionism that seek to control and regulate children's lives in the service of what is perceived to be their "best interests," and for many the process of managing and limiting child risk has become a valuable commodity (Buckingham).

The extent to which these two parallel trends (increased autonomy on the one hand and increased regulation on the other) have impacted upon cultural representations of childhood has yet to be fully explored. Analysis of the modern "family film" can, however, afford particularly revealing insights into this process as it necessarily unites both adult and child audiences, mediating between adult perceptions of childhood and **[End Page 245]** a child's understanding of adults. In contrast to children's literature, which is predominantly author-driven, the family film is entirely market-led, a phenomenon that makes it a far more transparent portrayer of the dominant social and cultural climate than is its literary counterpart.

Ever since it first emerged in the mid-1950s, the "family film" has been

an extremely popular and lucrative form of entertainment, and there is little doubt but that the genre has steadily evolved over the course of its history in concert with social and cultural changes. Sanitized plots, conventional family relationships and sentimentalized childhoods (elements that once formed the staple of the Disney empire) have now largely receded from dominance with films about real-life traumas, broken homes and troubled child heroes taking the lead. The topics and themes deemed appropriate for young audiences have also widened considerably, and films such as Barry Sonnenfeld's *Addams Family Values* (1991) and Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988) and *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993) have fuelled an intensifying fascination for the Gothic, the horrific, and the grotesque. The extent to which the modern family film can be said to challenge traditional constructs of childhood and adulthood is, however, far more complex than might initially appear to be the case. Although superficially many modern family films appear to afford an emancipatory vision of childhood, more detailed analysis often exposes an underlying conservatism, a regressive rather than a progressive streak, and a genuine refusal to engage in any meaningful way with the complex realities of modern family life.

Henry Selick's stop-motion film *Coraline* (2009) can, in many ways, be viewed as the pinnacle of the modern family film for, in addition to having garnered a plethora of prestigious awards,¹ it has become the second highest grossing stop-motion film ever. The reasons for the film's success are easy to explain; in addition to profiting from the emergent thirst for "child Gothic" (Coats), the film exploits new digital techniques to the utmost, creating a stunningly intricate, stop-motion spectacle, and capitalizing on the current vogue for 3D presentation. It also quite obviously draws on the pre-existing success of Neil Gaiman's eponymous, cross-over novel (2002), and the author himself, has expressed nothing but respect for Selick's autonomous creation ("Neil Gaiman"). Film critics, journalists, and bloggers have all been extravagant in their praise,² and...



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



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