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Lester, Cat

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Document Version
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Citation for published version (Harvard):
Lester, C 2021, Giving kids Goosebumps: uncanny aesthetics, cyclic structures and anti-didacticism in children's horror anthology series. in S Abbott & L Jowett (eds), *Global TV Horror.* Horror Studies, University of Wales Press, pp. 121-136. <https://www.uwp.co.uk/book/global-tv-horror/>

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

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Download date: 29. Apr. 2024

‘Viewer, beware! You’re in for a scare…’ Uncanny aesthetics, cyclic structures and anti-didacticism in the children’s horror anthology series

Catherine Lester

Despite being a regular *Goosebumps* (1995–98) viewer as a child, I can recall only one episode in any detail. It involves a boy and an ant farm that he keeps in his bedroom. Most of the details are vague, but the conclusion of the episode has always remained with me: the boy goes outside of his house and looks up to see that his neighbourhood is inside of a huge glass dome, and outside of it, looming over the houses, are giant ants. This is a carnivalesque universe in which ants keep humans in glass cages, and the boy’s own keeping of ants was a dream.

It is unsurprising that the only part of this episode, ‘Awesome Ants’ (3.15), that I can remember is the end. *Goosebumps*, an anthology horror series for children that tells an isolated scary story in each episode, is renowned for its twist endings. These twists either introduce a new threat at the last minute or, as with ‘Awesome Ants’, end with a shock revelation about the protagonist and/or the world they live in.

Twist endings or open-ended narratives are not exclusive to children’s horror anthologies, or even anthologies for adults, as ‘many television formats lend themselves to a lack of resolution’ (Jowett and Abbott, 2013: 35). However, twist endings are a characteristic of children’s horror anthologies that is not as widely shared by other children’s horror audio-visual media. As I have noted about children’s horror films including *Hocus Pocus* (1993), *Coraline* (2009) and *Frankenweenie* (2012), they invariably conclude with a happy resolution that chimes with the dominant adult notion that children’s stories should end ‘happily ever

after' in order to provide comfort and closure to the child audience (Lester, 2016: 30). Despite this, children's horror anthology programmes with unresolved endings are common. *Goosebumps* and *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (1990–2000), which are both Canadian, kick-started a cycle of North-American horror anthologies for children in the 1990s and 2000s. These include Canada's *Freaky Stories* (1997–2000), New Zealand's *Freaky* (2003), the US's *The Nightmare Room* (2001–02) and *Deadtime Stories* (2012–14), and the US-Canadian co-productions *Tales from the Cryptkeeper* (1993–2000) and *R. L. Stine's The Haunting Hour* (2010–14). In Britain, children's horror anthologies have been popular since the 1970s with *Shadows* (1975–78), *Dramarama: Spooky* (1983), *Grizzly Tales for Gruesome Kids* (2000–) and most recently the Canadian-British co-production *Creeped Out* (2017–).

The endurance of the children's horror anthology through cultural and industrial changes and across national boundaries evidences this as a form that resonates deeply with child audiences, despite its defiance of conventional wisdom about what children's (horror) media 'should' look like. My own lingering memory of *Goosebumps* also testifies to the way these narratives can haunt us into adulthood. Helen Wheatley classifies this half-remembering of children's horror texts by adults as uncanny, in that it belongs to 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (Wheatley, 2012: 384; Freud, 1919: 124–25). Concurrent to these 'afterlives', horror anthologies for adults have experienced a resurgence in production, popularity and critical acclaim, with prominent examples being *Black Mirror* (2011–), *Inside No. 9* (2014–), *American Horror Story* (2011–) and a revival of *The Twilight Zone* (2019). Yet children's television in Britain and Canada (the main producers of children's horror anthologies) continues to face decreased financial investment and production (Anon., 2018: 3; Robertson, 2018). In this industrial context it is both timely and necessary to draw attention to the value

of children's horror anthologies and the blend of fear and pleasure they offer to thrill-seeking child viewers. It is particularly significant that the children's horror anthologies listed above represent an international (albeit Anglophone) scope, primarily but not exclusively outside of the US. Along with these programmes' televisual status and open-ended narratives, this international context situates children's horror anthologies as providing subversive alternatives to the Hollywood/cinematic 'norm' that conforms to traditional ideas of children's horror fiction as needing to provide comfort and resolution.[1]

Children, horror and television: a triptych of devaluation

Despite the ongoing endurance and popularity of children's horror anthologies, they have been largely overlooked by scholarship in horror, television and children's media studies. R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* novels (1992–97), the basis for the series, have received scholarly and media attention due to their popularity with children and moral concern from adults about their perceived effect on children's literacy and wellbeing (Tanner, 2010). It is only recently that the television adaptation, and children's horror television more broadly, have been the subject of scholarly analysis (Peirse, 2010; Wheatley, 2012; Balanzategui, 2018).

That children's horror anthologies have long been neglected by academia is unsurprising as children's horror television occupies the bottom rung of a hierarchy of cultural value. The horror genre has historically been considered inferior to more 'respectable' genres (Wood, 2003: 69). This might be attributed to its association with teen and young adult audiences (Twitchell, 1985: 7), and yet horror made specifically for children is equally disparaged for being 'safe' and 'unable to get seriously scary' (Newman, 2011:

283). Television horror has similarly faced accusations of being hampered by its domestic viewing context that, for Gregory A. Waller, makes it cosy and reassuring rather than frightening, while advertisement breaks and televisual flow mean that 'having been to hell and back, the viewer can proceed with life as normal' (1987: 148, 159). Children's media and television are therefore linked by the notion that they are both 'space[s] where horror supposedly does not belong' (Hills, 2005: 111), or downright 'impossible': not scary enough to be 'true' horror due to the limitations of their audience or medium (Lester, 2016; Waller, 1987: 159). Television horror's affective ability has since been persuasively defended (Wheatley, 2006; Hills, 2005: 109–28; Jowett and Abbott, 2013) while Waller's arguments are less applicable to television horror produced in the TVIII era due to looser content restrictions and the lack of advertising on premium cable networks (Jowett and Abbott, 2013: 11–12). These content restrictions still apply to children's horror television in order to adhere to notions of 'suitability' for children, but criticisms of the quality of children's horror television remain suspect. These are made by *adult* critics judging content made for viewers who do not have the same experience or tolerance for horror. When Newman derides what he derogatorily calls 'kiddie horror' for not being scary enough, he fails to consider that these texts might indeed be frightening for children (2011: 283). It is therefore important to acknowledge that children's television horror serves a purpose for an audience with very specific needs and tolerances, and to treat it with the same level of scholarly rigour and respect as any adult text, regardless of genre or medium.

Alison Peirse (2010), Helen Wheatley (2012) and Jessica Balanzategui (2018) have begun to remedy this gap in scholarship and value by addressing the ways that children's horror television can offer narratives of empowerment to viewers through their focus on child protagonists experiencing pertinent adolescent hurdles, like puberty, through the generic lens

of horror. Moreover, they reveal children's horror television to hold important and previously unacknowledged positions in the histories of television and children's media in North America and Britain. This chapter builds upon this scholarship by drawing further attention to the children's horror anthology format and how its specifically televisual qualities allow it to achieve a balance of being simultaneously frightening, pleasurable and 'child-friendly'.

Horror and television are also united by concerns that they are 'bad' for children. Horror has faced anxieties that children exposed to it will imitate and/or be psychologically harmed by on-screen violence (Lester, 2016: 23), while television is worried to damage children's mental and physical wellbeing by drawing them away from more productive, educational or active pursuits (Messenger-Davies, 1989: 47). These assumptions about horror and television construct children's horror television as the lowest of the low: an inauthentic form of horror that is incapable of being truly frightening due to its audience of address and medium, yet simultaneously and paradoxically capable of corrupting children who watch it. As with cultural devaluations of horror, television and children's media, these criticisms have been widely debunked due to a lack of sufficient evidence, and many have argued for television and horror's potential benefits for children. In *Television Is Good for Your Kids* (1989) Máire Messenger-Davies argues that television has the potential to encourage creativity and empathy, and simultaneously entertain and educate. Other scholarship has made claims for the potential pedagogic elements of children's culture that is horrific in nature, like the fairy tale and cautionary tale (Bettelheim, 1976; Tatar, 1998; Coats, 2008). However, these claims are mostly unsubstantiated, and the extent to which children's television horror is only valuable if it is 'beneficial' for children is equally problematic and paradoxical as the assumptions that it is harmful (Buckingham, 1996: 136). As noted by Chloé Germaine Buckley in relation to children's Gothic literature, the genre embodies 'a

contradiction between the pedagogical function of children's literature as it has been traditionally conceived on the one hand and the supposedly transgressive nature of Gothic on the other' (2018: 4).[2]

This chapter brings together these existing value judgements and scholarly approaches to children, horror and television to provide a counter-argument to derisive attitudes to children's television horror. Spurred by my childhood memory of *Goosebumps*' twist ending, my analysis considers how the narrative structures and formal and aesthetic elements of children's horror anthologies offer child viewers pleasurable doses of fear in ways that are specifically televisual, and which deftly negotiate the limitations facing the creation of horror for a child audience. With one of these limitations being that children's television is heavily scrutinised to a much greater extent than adult television for its didactic possibilities (Messenger-Davies, 2015: 114), I will also question the extent to which children's horror anthologies on television can be considered as offering a pedagogic or otherwise 'beneficial' function to child viewers.

The horror of the home

As acknowledged above, unexpected or unresolved endings are not unique to children's horror anthologies. Balanzategui notes that *Goosebumps* and *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (henceforth *AYAOTD?*) draw from the techniques of adult horror anthologies, such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959–64, 1985–9, 2002–3) and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–65, 1985–9), 'while modulating these devices in order to reduce the thematic and affectual potency of the horror' to make them suitable for a child audience (2018: 209). Another device that carries over from adult television horror to the children's horror anthology is the location of horror in

the homes of protagonists. Indeed, Wheatley's characterisation of children's Gothic television as uncanny develops from her argument that all Gothic television is inherently uncanny due to a 'congruence between the homes and families on the screen and the domestic context of viewing' (2006: 81). The frisson arising from this blur between fiction and reality allows television horror to overcome its primary challenge, the 'representation of the unrepresentable', whether this is material too graphic for the content limitations of broadcast television, or material that cannot be convincingly represented due to budgetary limitations (26). As this challenge of representation affects children's horror television to an even greater extent due to stricter content limitations imposed upon children's media, children's horror anthologies also situate themselves firmly within domestic spaces or other everyday locations familiar to children, like schools.

In *Goosebumps* this location of horror within the domestic is firmly established in the opening title sequence. It begins with a close-up on the briefcase of R. L. Stine as he walks along a hill overlooking a town. His briefcase opens and the stories inside are scattered by the wind, unleashing the horrors he has created upon the unsuspecting community. This is represented by a ghostly letter 'G' which floats through the town, eventually coming to rest upon the front door of a house. The door opens to display a montage of shots from a variety of the programme's episodes, with the images alternating between monsters and screaming child protagonists. As 'television is a mode that enters the domestic space, and thus the fabric and rhythms of children's everyday lives', the *Goosebumps* opening sequence raises the possibility of an uncanny resemblance between the homes on screen and the homes of the viewers, as well as a resemblance between the children on screen and those watching at home (Balanzategui, 2018: 201). The opening sequence alone thus demonstrates the potential of

children's horror anthologies to evoke fear and unease within the strict boundaries of children's television.

The uncanny also manifests in children's horror anthologies through objects that draw upon intellectual uncertainty as to whether an inanimate object is alive, as well as the horror of the familiar, as many of these are children's playthings that viewers may have in their own bedrooms: puppets (*Creeped Out*'s 'Slapstick' (1.1)), Halloween masks (*Goosebumps*' 'The Haunted Mask' (1.1)), family photographs (*The Haunting Hour'*s 'Red Eye' (3.7)) and dolls ('Red Eye', *The Haunting Hour*'s 'Really You' (1.1), *AYAOTD?*'s 'The Tale of the Dollmaker' (3.5)). For Wheatley, the uncanny is also located in Gothic television's very structures, 'in repetitions and returns [and] disorienting filming and editing' (2006: 7). Uncanny aesthetics and domestic spaces are combined to highly effective means in *Dramarama: Spooky*'s 'In a Dark, Dark Box' (1.5).

Some have noted that children's television is less bound by the constraints of realism than adult television, which often results in experimental methods (Messenger-Davies, 2015: 114–15; Wheatley, 2012: 383). The anthology series arguably allows for even further innovation as it is unbound by serial continuity. 'In a Dark, Dark Box' features a boy staying at his grandmother's house, a prototypical Gothic home with shadowy hallways, creaking structures and a storm raging outside. The grandmother tells the boy a bedtime story, but this does not have the desired effect of helping him sleep. The story is a repetitive children's poem that begins, 'In the dark, dark wood there was a dark, dark house / And in the dark, dark house, there was a dark, dark hall…' and so on, with each successive line referring to a room, a corner, a cupboard, a trunk, a box and another box. The grandmother keeps restarting

the poem due to interruptions from the storm outside and the frightened boy's interjections. As the poem unfolds he becomes convinced that the house in the poem is his grandmother's house. He also has an uncanny sense that he has heard the poem before. Eventually, the grandmother stops to put the boy to bed, leaving the poem unfinished and the contents of the final box unknown. Unable to sleep, the boy obsessively searches the house to shake his uneasy feeling that it is the same one from the poem. As he does so, he recites the poem aloud to figure out how it ends and provide himself with the comfort of a resolution. As such, the episode shows a self-awareness of the ways in which anthologies can be playful, taunting and subversive, withholding the resolutions that child viewers are thought to need.

As the boy searches, the episode's mise-en-scène and sound take on a disorienting and feverish quality that mirrors the boy's state of mind. His obsessive narration of the poem is replaced by the eerie echoing of his grandmother's disembodied voice, her silhouette projected impossibly (because her actual body is not present) against the wall of the shadowy hallway. As he climbs the stairs the shadows of the banisters fall across his body, figuring his entrapment within the repetitive loop of the poem. The frame rate also momentarily reduces, giving him the appearance of a liminal, ghostly figure, destabilising his physicality in tandem with his grip on reality. 'I'm in the poem', he concludes in one moment, but contradicts himself the next when he 'can't tell what's real.' When he opens the box to uncover the secret hidden inside, he discovers that it is a written copy of the poem — and so the terror continues, just like the anthology format itself which returns episode after episode to provide new and unresolved threats. In contrast to criticisms of television horror, 'In a Dark, Dark Box' demonstrates how children's horror anthologies use the constraints of the televisual medium and the child audience to their advantage by employing repetition, unresolved

stories, uncanny aesthetics and the dissolution of the boundaries between fiction and reality, and between a fictional home and a real one, to chilling effect.

The location of horror at home is not unique to children's horror anthologies or television, as many children's horror films including *Coraline* and *Monster House* (2006) present the home as an uncanny and threatening space. The anthology format's obsession with the domestic stands apart from its cinematic equivalents because each new episode tells an isolated story in a new home, with a new child victim. This implies that the events that befall the protagonists are random and repetitive occurrences which could even affect the child viewer watching from within their own home. The open-ended narratives increase this horror by leaving the monstrous threats within the protagonists' homes. *Creeped Out*'s 'Cat Food' (1.2) is a chilling demonstration of this. A boy, Stu, discovers that his elderly neighbour is a monster who eats cat food, and who wants to exchange her frail body for Stu's so that she can extend her life. Stu agrees to a card game; if he wins, he can keep his body. Stu cheats to ensure his success, but the monster then uses Stu's cheating tactic to win the body of his sister instead. The episode ends with a slow track in on Stu's horrified face as realisation dawns that he must now live with a monster that has infiltrated his home and family.

On twists, buffers and frames

Discussing the *Goosebumps* novels, Heidi Anne Mesmer argues that their twist endings create a 'chaotic reality' where 'there is no causal relationship between events … and ultimately no hope' (1998: 114). This also applies to televisual anthology episodes like

Freaky's 'Lab Rats' (1.1) in which a girl discovers that her school is a giant rat-run for even bigger alien students to experiment upon human test subjects. Episodes like this refute accusations that both television horror and children's horror are 'safe' and ineffective. These bleak endings are also surprising given the 'discourses of protection and harm that surround broadcasting for younger viewers' (Jowett and Abbott, 2013: 26). I argue that it is precisely the assumptions that television and children's media are incompatible with horror that works in favour of children's horror anthologies: if adult creators and gatekeepers of children's entertainment (whether broadcasters or guardians) assume children's horror television to be ineffective, this may result in a more lenient attitude that allows it to push the boundaries of 'acceptability' or 'suitability' more than children's horror cinema.

Balanzategui suggests that another element that accounts for this leniency is the use of framing devices which form a buffer between the viewer and the frightening content of the episodes (2018: 209–10). The framing device of *AYAOTD?* shows a group of adolescents around a campfire; the narrative of each episode is a story that one child is telling the others. According to Balanzategui, this enforces the story's fictionality and provides a 'familiar continuity via a set of recurring characters who are situated "outside" of the horror, and thus always unaffected by it' (211). However, many children's horror anthologies have no such framing device (e.g. *Dramarama: Spooky* and *Goosebumps*, with the exception of its first episode) or the framing *reinforces* the horror. In *Creeped Out*, the framing provides continuity with a recurring, masked character called The Curious. This character does not tell stories but appears in the locations where each episode's narrative takes place. Unlike *AYAOTD?*, *Creeped Out*'s framing undermines the fictionality of the stories by presenting The Curious as an impartial bystander, like the child viewer at home, watching the horror unfold and powerless (or unwilling) to stop it.

If no buffer features in programmes like *Creeped Out*, this may be provided by the nature of television flow, as Waller suggests, where advertisement breaks or interstitial content cushion horrific material. This is the case for the broadcast of *Creeped Out* on CBBC, which is introduced by two young and cheery presenters in a high-key lit, brightly-coloured studio. After the episode's close the presenters encourage viewers to go online and vote on how scary they found the episode. This functions as a form of John Ellis' concept of broadcast television allowing viewers to collectively 'work through' cultural anxieties. If, as Ellis claims, television is there alongside us, 'holding our hands', the children's television presenter provides that symbolic hand-holding and reminds the child viewer that the horror is over (2000: 74). The online voting offers further 'working through' by acknowledging fear as a valid response and allowing the child viewer to 'gamify' or take control over it by assigning it a rating, from 'I have spookier homework!' to 'CREEPED OUT!', and compare their level of fear with other children (CBBC, 2017).[3] It is unclear how effective these buffers are at dispelling children's fear, but we must remind ourselves that children's television, including interstitial and interactive content, is created by adults and constructs an adult conception of what children do or not find frightening or comforting. It is possible that episodes of children's horror anthologies can be left unresolved because the adults creating, broadcasting and/or safeguarding them assume that the nature of television flow will render them less frightening. It is therefore the very televisuality of children's horror anthologies, and the 'taken-for-grantedness' they are often subjected to, that enables them to challenge notions of suitability in children's content.

The use of unresolved endings can also be subjected to an alternate reading. My argument that these endings leave the child viewer with fear that may be dispelled by extra-diegetic televisual content is more applicable to new or inexperienced viewers who are not familiar with the anthology format or the patterns of individual programmes, like *Goosebumps*. But as *Goosebumps* increased in popularity, so did expectations for twist endings. As humorously pointed out in the meta-textual 2015 film adaptation, the *Goosebumps* formula consists of three parts: a beginning, a middle and a twist. This raises the possibility that child viewers learn to expect the twists as they become accustomed to the conventions of specific programmes. In so doing, child viewers may build a tolerance to the horror and derive 'pleasure of the unexpected' in addition to, or instead of, fear (Johnson, 2015: 58). In relation to this, Filipa Antunes reads the recurring twists as a metaphor for puberty (2015: 197–98). Just as children adapt to disgusting or distressing changes in their bodies or lives, children's horror anthologies enable children to deal with fear by repeatedly subjecting them to it without providing an easy or comforting resolution.

This thinking implies that children's horror anthologies perform a beneficial function for their viewers. This directly contradicts conservative ideas that both horror and television are a negative influence upon children, but aligns with scholarship that argues for their therapeutic or didactic potential. I wish to question this harm/benefit binary and suggest that children's horror anthologies are, in fact, neither of these things, but emphasise the experience of pleasurable and subversive fun above all else.

The sadistic pleasure of anti-didacticism

I have mentioned above that children's horror fiction generally takes after the fairy tale or cautionary tale in that it seeks to convey a moral lesson to the child audience via the use of horror. Though these forms are similar, there is a subtle difference between them that informs my reading of children's horror anthologies. Fairy tales typically tell a story about a child who encounters a horrific situation and successfully overcomes it, in the process learning an important lesson or skill, while cautionary tales usually end with the brutal punishment of the child; there is no happy ending or reward. Children's horror anthologies therefore more closely align with cautionary tales: short stories in which misbehaving children are brutally punished in apposite ways, a well-known example being Heinrich Hoffmann's collection *Struwwelpeter* (1845). In one tale, 'The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb', a boy's thumbs are chopped off with shears as punishment for his refusal to stop sucking them. The nineteenth-century cautionary tale developed from religious children's texts that '[assumed] that the child was a damned soul from birth, who needed to be saved', and strongly eschewed the idea of reading for pleasure (Hunt, 1994: 38–9). Many episodes of children's horror anthologies are cautionary tales, in that a child character is specifically warned not do something, such as cheat ('Cat Food'), use a broken water slide (*Freaky*'s 'Slide' (1.1)) or bully others (*Creeped Out*'s 'Trolled' (1.3)), and terrible things happen to them when they do not comply. By the end of the episode they have either met a sticky end or become a compliant member of society. *Grizzly Tales for Gruesome Kids* most overtly follows this format. It is also targeted at younger children than the other anthologies discussed thus far, as indicated by its animated medium and short, ten-minute running time. This suggests, more than any other children's horror anthologies, that it intends to socialise children and teach them 'proper' behaviour as early as possible in their social development.

The *Grizzly Tales* episode 'The Barber of Civil' (1.9) repurposes 'The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb' into a tale of two very rude children, Tanya and Peregrin. One day, a man claiming to be a barber appears at their school, notes their cheekiness, and books them in for haircuts. When Tanya and Peregrin arrive, they discover that the barber does not cut hair, but tongues: 'I teach little children to keep a civil tongue in their heads! … I snip out the rudeness, I trim off the cheekiness', he taunts, emphasised by the waggling of his own tongue as he talks. The episode does not display the excising of the children's tongues, thus remaining within the bounds of 'suitability' for children. Instead, following in the vein of the suggestive aesthetics of 'In a Dark, Dark Box', the episode focuses on the shadow of the barber as he looms over Peregrin, wielding his scissors as he cackles wickedly. The episode then cuts to show Tanya and Peregrin standing complacently in a playground. The narrator informs the viewer that 'they were different children … they didn't swear, they weren't cheeky, and they didn't try to be clever in front of the rest of the class!'

This aligns with conventional readings of nineteenth-century cautionary tales as didactic. However, recent scholarship has questioned whether this didacticism was intentional. Barbara Smith Chalou reveals that *Struwwelpeter* intended to provide an entertaining alternative to contemporaneous didactic children's texts (2007: 24) and Justine Gieni argues that the tales are parodic and subversive because they appeal to children's sense of fun and fascination with violence and disgust (2016: 38). Whether children actually receive the tales in this way is unclear, but this reading demonstrates their subversive potential while the surface appearance of didacticism appeases moral guardians. In this context, *Grizzly Tales* is similarly transgressive. This is further justified by the ways children's horror anthologies already subvert conventional understandings of what children's media 'should' look like, as argued above. 'The Barber of Civil' also clearly marks itself as

parodic with its title, a reference to the opera *The Barber of Seville*. *Grizzly Tales* further positions itself in opposition to high art with its rudimentary animation style (2-D-animated stories with stop-motion framing devices). This works within the budgetary limitations of children's television to produce a crude and ugly aesthetic that matches the absurd, hyperbolic and tongue-in-cheek tone of the programme.

'The Barber of Civil' also resists didacticism by inviting child viewers to revel in a certain sadism at seeing other children punished in humorously horrifying ways. This suggests a more complex mode of engagement than the passive viewing that children have oft been assumed to occupy by detractors of children's television. It also recalls Carol J. Clover's argument that the formal methods of the slasher subgenre encourage (adult) viewers to shift their identifications between villain and victim (1992: 12). This shift plays out in a particularly interesting way in *Creeped Out*'s 'Slapstick' in which the protagonist becomes implicated in the punishment of other children. The episode unites most of the hallmarks of children's horror anthologies I have discussed here: uncanny aesthetics, a cyclic and unresolved narrative, and (anti-)didacticism. Protagonist Jessie is embarrassed by her parents. When a strange boy approaches her and tells her that she can wish for them to be less embarrassing, she eagerly follows his instructions. Her parents become blank automatons who do exactly as Jessie instructs. Although she enjoys this control at first, she is also unsettled by her parents' uncannily expressionless faces and robotic behaviour. She discovers that her parents' personalities have been transferred into puppets in a Punch and Judy-style show at the beach, which is presided over by an evil living puppet, Blackteeth. His assistant is the same boy who approached Jessie at the beginning of the episode. To return her parents to normal, the boy explains that Jessie must find 'understudies' to replace the puppets of her parents – as he did by choosing her as his 'understudy' to restore his own parents. The

episode ends with Jessie looking out over the beach, searching for the next victim in the continuous cycle of horror.[4]

The conclusion of ‘Slapstick’ indicates that the horror will not only continue past the episode’s close, but that it also necessitates children’s punishment of each other under the guise of a moral: ‘be careful what you wish for’. The repetition provided by the anthology format allows children to revel in this over and over, with the freedom of lacking the emotional attachment with characters that might be formed when viewing longer-form narratives, like feature-length films. The specificities of the televisual medium therefore provide a context in which to give children fearful pleasure in ways that differ from film, especially the model of closed-off, resolved narratives associated with children’s horror films in Hollywood cinema. That these programmes are predominantly from national contexts outside of the US further positions them as offering alternative horrific experiences for children.

Finally, even while children’s horror anthologies can be read as anarchic, the *appearance* of didacticism allows them to maintain the image of doing children ‘good’, while slyly offering subversive pleasure. This directly contrasts prevailing ideas about the safety and ineffectiveness of children’s horror television. To that effect, I would like to conclude by repurposing the message of Messenger-Davies’ *Television Is Good for Your Kids*. If the children’s horror anthology series tells us anything, it is that it is not important whether it conforms to adult notions of being ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for children. Rather, it allows children to experience both fear and fun on their own terms – and that is ‘good’ enough.

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[1] Although some serialised children's horror television programmes such as *Children of the Stones* (1977) also lack a definitive resolution, whether at the end of an episode or the end of an entire series, the anthology serves as the most potent example of this due to its lack of serialisation which removes the possibility of open endings being resolved the following episode.

[2] This chapter draws from some scholarship on the Gothic. While some argue that horror and the Gothic are distinct categories (Kavka, 2002), they are also often used interchangeably. For simplicity, and given that both are widely agreed to be characterised by their intention to evoke fear, the terms 'horror' and 'Gothic' are used interchangeably throughout this chapter.

[3] *Creeped Out* launched in an era of increased availability of streaming, on-demand television and binge-watching. These modes of viewing may cause the buffers to be lost. This is the same for present-day children who may binge-watch episodes of older anthologies on streaming platforms or DVD. It is not within the remit of this chapter to explore the impact this might have on readings of these programmes, but it needs acknowledging as an area that warrants further research.

[4] The conclusion of 'Slapstick' is particularly interesting for the way it evokes the endings of adult horror films such as *Ring* (1998) and *It Follows* (2014), where the survival of the protagonists relies on them passing a curse on to someone else. This further evidences the subversive potential of the children's horror anthology format as

it takes after adult horror conventions, which are traditionally considered to be unsuitable for children, more than those of children's media.