

'Revolution is like Saturn': children as metaphors of unsettlement

Dr Ivan Phillips, University of Hertfordshire

The title of this paper is taken from the first act of Georg Büchner's play *Danton's Death* (1835), in which the eponymous hero declares that 'Revolution is like Saturn, he devours his own children.' The phrase is a suggestive one, evoking the paranoiac consumption of his progeny by Cronos who, having overthrown and immasculated his father, Ouranus, fears a similar fate at the hands of his own offspring. His wife, Rhea, also his sister, sickened by the successive gobbling of their children Demeter, Hestia, Poseidon, Hera and Hades, saves the newborn Zeus by hiding him in a cave and offering Cronos a rock wrapped as a babe-in-arms instead. Cronos, evidently no connoisseur despite his brutal appetite, swallows the swaddled rock without a second thought. Significantly, swaddling cloths – *incunabula* – have often been used as metaphors for emergent information technologies, and it is in this respect that the myth of Cronos and his children might seem to prefigure something of the complex relationship between children and media.

Characterised by tropes of absorption, authority and sequence, cultural assumptions about childhood might be seen as corresponding to patterns of evolution within media culture itself. This relates to a notion of media development that I've been considering for some time, mainly as a consequence of my teaching on courses in interactive media, model design and special effects, animation and screen cultures. This notion – which I once thought might be a law of media, but which I now consider to be something a little less tyrannical – was formalised through many conversations with my erstwhile colleague, Alan Peacock, and was at some point designated as 'unsettlement' by one, other or both of us. The principle of unsettlement suggests that all media undergo an incunabulaic period of unsettlement or radical instability, typified by formal self-consciousness and experimentation, which is followed by assimilation within a 'mythic' world-view, typified by more

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settled processes of narration, representation, reception. Once a medium has been integrated, the restless energies of its inception are diverted into marginal practices that nevertheless inform and at times challenge the mainstream.

There are notable precursors to the idea of unsettlement, of course, and its theoretical location can be found somewhere between Thomas Kuhn's concept of 'paradigm shift', Marshall McLuhan's model of 'hot' and 'cool' media and John Keats's formulation of 'negative capability'. Kuhn's account of scientific change as a series of 'peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions' through which 'one world view is replaced by another' has, perhaps, been too easily appropriated and distorted, becoming an easy part of discourses for which it was never intended. McLuhan's bipolar designation of media processes as either 'hot' or 'cool' – highly resolved, clear and fixed, or unresolved, enigmatic and variable – is, on the other hand, too simplistic in its basic form to be truly meaningful in a world characterised by increasingly subtle, intricate processes of digital information exchange and interaction. Then again, like most of McLuhan's ideas, it is beautifully flexible and enticingly adaptable to the media environment of the twenty-first century, where the hot and the cool exist in a constant restless dynamic of passive-active engagement. Behind McLuhan's moments of 'cool' unpredictability, we might sense the spectral presence of Keats and hear the famous words that he wrote to his brothers in December 1817 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and fiction'.

The Romantic spirit exemplified by Keats has been derided as childish and exalted as child-like, and the imaginative openness and fluidity of Negative Capability sounds very much like an adult trying to define and inhabit a particular version of what it is to be a child. In the same way, McLuhan's charismatic but unscientific brand of technological determinism has been disparaged for its intellectual puerility at the same time as being adulated for its innocent playfulness of approach. No-one could ever describe Kuhn as

childish or child-like, but ‘paradigm shift’ as an idea has certainly become a plaything within the moving toyshop of academic discourse. The key thing here is that Kuhn, McLuhan and Keats, in their different ways, all provide ways of considering instability, or *unsettlement*, as an essential aspect of mediated experience at specific points in the life of an individual and of a culture.

From the perspective of media evolution, the quality of unsettlement is most easily recognised in those moments when the potential of a nascent technology is comically underestimated – when the Lumière Brothers refer to cinema as ‘an invention without any future’, for instance, around 1895, or when Mary Somerville dismisses television as ‘a flash in the pan’ in 1948, or when Ken Olson, in 1977, claims that ‘there is no reason why anyone would want a computer in their home’. When a medium is new it is unknown and unknowable, unfixed and rudely stamped: this makes it vulnerable, but it also makes it rich with possibilities. The rough magic of films made in the first decade of cinema by the likes of Georges Méliès, R.W. Paul and Cecil Hepworth are no longer possible once D.W. Griffith has made *Birth of a Nation*. Similarly, the gloriously inchoate animation of Émile Cohl and J. Stuart Blackton begins to recede from view once professional studios are founded by John Bray (in 1914) and Walt Disney (in 1922) and the practice of the animator has been defined in the dictionary (in 1919).

Unsettlement is manifest at the formal level in media works, where it can constitute the kind of ‘material metaphor’ discussed by N. Katherine Hayles in her book *Writing Machines*. So, in the early days of the novel – or at least, the novel in its clarified modern form – it can be seen in the extreme textual elephantiasis of Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novels (1740-53) and in the self-conscious playfulness of Laurence Sterne’s *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67). It is also evident in the thematic components of media and, insofar as form and content can ever be separated, it is foregrounded through aspects of character, plot and environment at times of intense cultural change. The great and enduring Gothic novels of emergent

modernity are distinguished, in this respect, by the characters of dark sociopathic unsettlement: the nameless animated corpse of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the unstable soul of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the ancient parasitic outsider of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the ghost in the shadows of Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera*.

Childhood is our common period of unsettlement – gloriously, dangerously, dizzyingly unfixed – and this is reflected in the slippery contradictions of both its representation in media forms and the cultural articulations of its close relationship to those forms. At times, the unsettlement of the nascent medium coincides, and is intricately interwoven, with the unsettlement of its depicted children. It is no coincidence, in this sense, that *Tristram Shandy* begins with the conception of its eponymous anti-hero, nor that – in the wanderings and ponderings of its digressive narrative mechanism – Tristram himself remains largely heard but not seen, with little detail provided of his life beyond infancy across the nine published volumes. We learn of his distracted conception, his nose-flattening birth, his sad misnaming, and his eye-watering encounter with a sash window, but – apart from elusive accounts of his youthful tours of France – he remains in the nursery, narrating from his cradle with the voice of an adult.

The golden age of the novel – concurrent, however loose or contentious our definitions, with modernity itself – is full of examples of narratives structured around the indeterminacy and exposed enigma of childhood experience. Again and again these provide a dramatic focus for fables of threat and transformation which might be seen as channelling the social, historical and political pressures of the time. The monstrous rejected child of *Frankenstein* has already been noted, but we might also think of Jane Eyre in the Red Room or Pip in the graveyard in *Great Expectations* or Tom and Ellie in the river in Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1862-3). These are very different child characters in very different novels but each of them inhabits a condition of anomaly that is definitive of unsettlement. Often this condition is distinguished by an air of menacing disturbance or ghastly (in the strictest

sense of the word) melancholy. The ghost child that visits Mr Lockwood on his first night at Wuthering Heights, gashing its wrists on the broken window glass of his room, is representative in this respect.

These fictions present children as emblems of both fragility and endurance, simultaneously susceptible and adaptable. In later myths of unsettlement their status as idealised and demonised archetypes, as embodiments of innocence and endlessly mutable vehicles for evil, is developed further and with even greater complexity and edginess. Consider, for instance, the chilling ambivalences of Henry James' portrayal of Flora and Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), the bitter-sweet pathological fantasia of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904, 1911), or the nightmarish otherness of the progeny in John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957). Consider, too, the characters of Sadako Yamamura in Koji Suzuki's *Ringu* (1991), Susie Salmon in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), and Eli in John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let The Right One In* (2004), all caught on the frontier between life and death, the first and last conveying further unsettlement in their hermaphroditism.

In recent years, the children of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-200) – their unsettled state reflected in the shifting forms of their daemons – have epitomised rebellious confidence and supple positivity in contrast to the atrophied settlement of adulthood. Harry Potter is similarly a figure of radical potential and, as the Boy Who Survived, might resonate interestingly with *Doctor Who*'s Amelia Pond, the Girl Who Waited. There can, after all, be few more unsettled profiles than that of a girl who grows up to befriend a daughter she hasn't given birth to (or even conceived) yet but who is nevertheless already older than she is, and who then discovers that she already knew the daughter as a different friend all along, having grown up with her as a member of her own peer group. In contrast to this, the gladiatorial unsettlement of Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* (2008-10) series seems entirely straightforward.

Unsettled representations of childhood are hardly, of course, an invention of modernity. They can easily be traced into folkloric traditions that seldom show children as the clear-cut devils or dolls inhabiting worlds of moral certitude that recent constructions of the fairy tale might lead us to expect. The earliest version of Little Red Riding Hood, identified by Jack Zipes, depicts a 'little peasant girl' who – without any sign of a red cap or hood – willingly partakes of the flesh and blood of her grandmother before getting between the sheets with the werewolf. Seduced by cannibalism and lycanthropy, she only draws the line when asked to piss the bed. A basic Google Image search indicates that the unsettlement of Little Red Riding Hood – her challenge to comfortable moral categories – is culturally comprehended, if little understood. Film versions of the story over the past thirty years, following Angela Carter's lead, have tended to foreground this aspect of the tale, but back as far the 1930s and 1940s, and in as supposedly innocent a medium as animation, its ethical evasiveness was artistically enacted. Animation, after all, is no more innocent than the fairy tales that it so often depicts.

The contradictions of cultural attitudes to, and portrayals of children, are nowhere more evident than in the controversies relating to their own use of media. From Mervyn Griffith-Jones' anxiety for doomed youth at the *Lady Chatterley* trial in 1960 ('would you approve of your young sons, young daughters – because girls can read as well as boys – reading this book?'), through the furore about *Child's Play 3* in relation to the murder of James Bulger in 1993, to the Byron Review of children and new technology in 2008, the sense of unease about what children do with media and what media does to children is a given. Popular television programmes of the early twenty-first century are often shaped by this confused moral paradigm, which on the one hand pretends that the media can heal our spoiled children (e.g. *Supernanny*) and on the other seems to use it as a means to fetishise them (e.g. *Child of Our Time*). With children being constructed simultaneously as the acme of wickedness, the apotheosis of hope, and the epitome of vulnerability, it seems that they are not alone in being unsettled.

To conclude, I will consider one of Bristol's own restless children, the poet Thomas Chatterton, around whom signifiers of unsettlement cluster like Gothic flies around a pot of cobweb jam. Chatterton died in London in August 1770, probably or possibly a suicide (depending on your viewpoint), three months short of his eighteenth birthday, on the verge of leaving the dubiously defined realm called childhood for the dubiously defined realm called adulthood. He left behind a massive body of 'acknowledged' poems, letters, sketches, dramas and essays, and an only slightly smaller body of poems, letters, sketches, dramas and essays purporting to be by (or translated from) a cast of historical figures ranging from the Saxon monk Turgot to the fifteenth-century knight, John Iscamme. The former have rarely been anyone's concern, whereas the latter – the so-called 'Rowley' pieces, named after their most prominent voice, the monk Thomas Rowley – were the stuff of learned dispute and extravagant enthusiasm (though precious little critical analysis) almost before the author was cold in his workhouse lime-pit. What Chatterton also left behind, though, was himself, his biography, which rapidly became his myth. It is between these two bequests – the writing, the living and dying – that a remarkable unsettlement becomes apparent.

The age in which Chatterton wrote was, in media terms, the age of literary settlement, of canon-building and textual ownership. In this context, Chatterton's Rowley works can be seen not simply invented texts, but as acts of wilful unsettlement, complex tactile and visual objects which revolt against print culture because they are both chimerical – they are forgeries of things which never existed – and unrepeatable. Subversive anachronisms, constituting an unknowable, uncontrollable mass in an era of empiricism and containment, they are authentic but faked, extant but lost from view, ancient but modern – perhaps even postmodern, if we take that term to refer to a style rather than an epoch. In cultural terms, this makes them dangerous: they are anomalous and unstable. When converted to printed text, they are effectively tamed, diminished, settled. Similarly, the biographical Chatterton is tidied up

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into the settlement of myth and, ultimately, neglect: so, the 'marvellous boy' of the Romantics becomes the broken angel of the Victorians and the invisible man of the last century. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, he and his work remain distinctly, uniquely unsettled. This famous dead teenager, this tragic man-child, perhaps the original rock'n'roll suicide, exemplifies the ways in which the Saturn of media revolution both creates and devours its own radical children.