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# The Global Village of the Damned: A Counter-Narrative for the Post-War Child

**ABSTRACT:** John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* and the films it engendered (*Village of the Damned* and *Children of the Damned*) represent the Child as both the post-World War II promise of a new global community and the very threat that such a promise entailed. These Children are seemingly without race, class, or even gender, and possess preternatural intelligence with the ability for unfettered communication among the other children of their kind. While such racially and nationally transcendent self-possession was the basis for the dream of post-war global harmony, it also constitutes in the Children of Midwich the threat of global annihilation. As such, these counterfeit Children sustain an exploration of post-war childhood, its theoretical underpinnings, and the contesting narratives necessary to make "childhood" signify as a human category in the twentieth century: they produce a range of contesting narratives as to what the Child might mean, and what it might have meant within the new globalizing forces following the Second World War. These contesting narratives, I maintain, both depend upon the masterplot of the Child as our sentimental culture imagines it, and interrupt that masterplot to make of the Child a dangerous and fatal force. As our Children run askew, they become a counter-fit to the sentimental, political narrative, signifying instead the more primitive, psychoanalytic narrative of death's inexorable drive.

**KEYWORDS:** *counterfeit child, UNESCO, childhood studies, child murder, Giorgio Agamben, Serge Leclair*

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“Breeding tells, you know.”

Dr. David Neville, *Children of the Damned*

IN HIS NOW notorious polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues that the Child functions as a phantasmatic signifier of futurity whose status queer theory must decry (4). This Child-signifier, he asserts, presents a never-to-be-fulfilled promise of political and ontological completion, a paradisaical realization of personal and social happiness in succeeding generations. Edelman names this ideological fantasy for a better tomorrow “reproductive futurism,” drawing from it two profoundly anti-queer implications. The first, which is political, is to deny the rights and pleasures of the queer or non-reproducing subject in the public sphere<sup>1</sup>: if you’re not raising a family, you’re not being socially or sexually responsible; go forth, then, and multiply. The second implication, which is more complexly ontological, is to blind the subject to the inescapable need to tarry with the negative, that is, to see that *future* fulfillment involves, even necessitates, a continual deferral and displacement. The promise of subjective completion as figured in the Child, Edelman argues, submits to this ideological misprision: it is a promise that can never be fulfilled. Judging from his archive of child-figures, Edelman’s argument seems irresistible. From Dickens’s Tiny Tim and George Eliot’s Eppie, through Little Orphan Annie and P. D. James’s *Children of Men*, to American presidential campaigns built on the fight to protect children while holding the candidate’s own children in front of the television camera, modernity’s Cult-and-Culture of Childhood would seem successfully to present a masternarrative of the Child as personal and political promise-made-good. And this masternarrative would seem with equal success to repress the Law of the Symbolic that sees the future as remaining *always* a day away, never coterminous with its meaning, never fulfilling its promise of plenitude.

While Edelman’s incisive analysis offers us purchase on many kinds of normalizing representations of the Child, it imagines children as ostensibly stable and promissory figures who will always seduce us to fighting on their side. Put in other terms, Edelman’s Child is always only sentimental, never belonging to any other representational category. And while such a stabilizing move is ultimately necessary for his profoundly *destabilizing* argument, students of genres like science fiction or the gothic know otherwise: those readers habitually encounter children who are as likely to sterilize, poison, or explosively decimate the future as they are to ensure it. Consider, for example, Stephen King’s Children of the Corn, who harvest more than crops with their scythes and pitchforks; or William March’s Rhoda Penmark, the Bad Seed who drowns playmates or breaks the necks of old ladies in order to possess a coveted bauble; or Steven Millhauser’s Jeffrey, the narrator of *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943–1954 by Jeffrey Cartwright*, who tries to seduce the eponymous Edwin to commit suicide so that he (Jeffrey) can complete the narrative arc of his literary biography and thus immortalize an American literary child-prodigy.<sup>2</sup> Or the children of my chief example in this essay, the progeny of Midwich, who first appeared in John Wyndham’s 1957 science-fiction novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos*,

and then quickly found their way into the 1960 *Village of the Damned* and its spin-off, *Children of the Damned* (1964). These children have all gestated at the same time by some sort of alien impregnation; are born simultaneously into a frighteningly coherent pod that thinks and acts as one; are capable of mind-control (which, in the films, also means mind-reading); and can murder through sheer force of brain power. As we shall see, any fight for *their* future is undertaken not to ensure the utopian promise of a better tomorrow but as a way for adults to postpone their own destruction (while at the same time assuring it).

In this essay I want to look at what I am loosely calling the Midwich progeny—“progeny” to name both the children born in John Wyndham’s town of Midwich and those sired by his novel into two successive films—for the way they sustain an exploration of childhood’s theoretical underpinnings, and their narrative interventions. Appearing at a salient moment in the global history of childhood (post-World War II), this triad of narratives presents us with a plenitude of childhood significations, a plenitude that I want to tease out by working across the novel and films. At the heart of this signifying plenitude, I contend, is a concatenation of qualities that can only belong to a “counterfeit” child, that is, a child who both proffers and belies those attributes of “child” it would seem to body forth (Bruhm 28).<sup>3</sup> If the sentimentalism that Edelman critiques in the (post)Victorian child is the genre of disavowal, in that it refuses to engage the possibility of failure at the level of the Child who bodies forth salvation, then the blend of science fiction and gothic that bodies forth the Midwich progeny can be said to thematize the failure of disavowal, in that it repeatedly invokes the sentimental in order to decimate or skewer it. In so doing, the Midwich progeny present in the counterfeit child a crucial counter-narrative to the masternarrative of Futurity’s Child upon which they lean.

Specifically, the damned Children of my analysis present us with something other than Better Living Through Reproduction because they are an impossible paradox. On the one hand, the Children are saturated with the symbolic determinants of childhood as they were articulated post-World War II. Witness the diagnosis of Midwich’s Chief Constable that the problem in the village is one of “doting mothers” and “spoilt sons,” “young children [ . . . ] allowed to get so thoroughly out of hand” that they become “swollen-headed little upstart[s]” (Wyndham 178–79, 183). The Constable, were he better read, might support his position by invoking authorities like Ayn Rand or the American novelist Philip Wylie, who would blame such behavior on “momism” run amok (191). It’s a maternal indulgence that Wyndham’s protagonist Gordon Zellyaby notes as well: “for a child to be tied to its mother’s apron strings is bad,” he opines, “but for a mother to be tied to a baby’s apron strings is serious” (Wyndham 102). At the same time, though, we have the flip side of this spoiled child, the dotingly parental, sentimental take of nursemaid Susan Eliot (Barbara Ferris) or psychologist Tom Llewellyn (Ian Hendry) in *Children of the Damned*. These “good” people try to protect the murderous children from state harm on the grounds that they are “just kids”; those kids, they maintain, need to be protected, listened to, and nurtured in the ways of the social (and here Tom and Susan might be taking their cue from Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care* from 1946). Seen from Tom and Susan’s angle, these “kids” are merely the sentimental sweet to the sour of the Constable’s observations—

a narrative contestation that invokes competing version of the “natural child” for its rhetorical energy.

Contrasting these good-parent-bad-parent stories of self-possessed children, though, is the realization that these “kids” are not kids at all, but counterfeits who offer a very different plot device from the ones of Edelman’s reading. Part of an alien invasion or “fertilizing gas” that has penetrated communities world-wide as “one of the new scientific horrors of our age” (Wyndham 83), these counterfeit Children have none of the innocence or neediness, none of the desires for love or parental affection that we regard as *de rigueur* for the young. They slip out from any recognizable diagnosis of childhood as a category other than that of a perfect futurity: they perform a precocity and self-possession that leaves them no room to be molded by adults. And so, if these children are “counterfeit” in the sense that they are alien invaders looking like or passing for children while exposing themselves as frauds, they are also “counterfeit” in another, more obscure, sense that the OED provides via the word’s Latin etymology: they are made “in opposition or contrast, hence, in *opposing* imitation” (my emphasis). They refuse to imitate the childhood innocence requisite for both childhood and futurity, but productively oppose and make legible what the signifier of “the child” may mean.

For the remainder of this essay I want to consider how the counterfeit status of the damned Children produces a range of contesting narratives as to what the Child might mean, and what it might have meant within the new globalizing forces following the Second World War. These contesting narratives, I maintain, make sense only in relation to the masterplot of the Child as Edelman (among many others) imagines it, but it is in precisely that relation that our Children run askew, that they become a counter-fit to the narrative that makes them mean. At the same time, though, the narrative threads meant to interrupt the child masterplot also support that plot, to the degree that each narrative both rests upon and deconstructs the sentimental child figure. If, as Edelman would have it, the misprision that permits the Child to embody the future self must be deferred and rendered phantasmatic, then our cuckoo-like substitutes, our counterfeit children, may be seen to eradicate the very idea of selfness that the child is thought to embody. At stake is a set of histories: familial, political, global, and ontological.

### The Population (and) Explosion

At the most local level, Midwich and its progeny generate a story of domestic, familial panic. These narratives literally enact the “fiction of fatherhood,” in that no man in Midwich can be sure that the child born to his wife has been sired by him—indeed, as time goes on he can be pretty certain that the opposite is the case. Mothers fare little better in that some are suspected of adultery, and then of lying about it after the fact, while others add utter bewilderment to their catalogue of affects, in that they’ve “never been touched” by a man or his manhood (*Children*). Of course, having a child born to a virgin with no father in sight, a child who, through his superiority in all matters, will rise to lead the masses, puts your average British family in rather auspicious

company, but that too is part of the problem. For if the parents *can* settle in to raising a child of dubious origins, their domestic tableau is not helped by the fact that the children are all prematurely developed, preternaturally intelligent, self-motivated, and dangerously independent. Such exceptionality, tied as it is to contemporary “parents’ dreams and desires” that their “own baby [ . . . ] be perfectly normal, and at the same time superior to all other babies” (Wyndham 98), registers yet another domestic anxiety, that of class transgression: Cyndy Hendershot reads *Village of the Damned* as the narrative of the “scholarship boy” who could use his innate scholastic intelligence to leap out of his class designation and to take his place, through talent rather than money, in a higher class of British citizen (Hendershot 225). That most of the children of Midwich develop their superior intellectual powers within their markedly working-class homes signals for Hendershot that it is really anxieties about class that underpin this story. This triad of narratives, then, shows us how many more tears are shed when our prayers for exceptional children are answered than when they are unanswered. The novel’s Gordon and Anthea Zellaby must be the only parents in modern history to be relieved when they find out their child is nothing special, that he was conceived along perfectly normal lines and will develop into a perfectly normal human being.

Spreading out from the domestic and the local, the Midwich triad touches, like so much science fiction, on fears of scientific advancement and nuclear threats in the Cold War of the 1950s. Wyndham’s novel makes much of the environmental traces of a space ship in the village, and it peppers its conversations with references to gaseous contaminations, X- and gamma rays, the promises or threats of the atomic age. These atomic threats lace the film narrative of *Village of the Damned* as well, trading the novel’s “space ship” explanation for atomic technologies much more human by design. *Children of the Damned* makes the concern even more ostensibly nuclear, in that scientists have found that “parthenogenesis,” one possible cause for these mysterious births, can be induced artificially by radiation. Indeed, central to the scientific debates in *Children of the Damned* is whether the Children are the product of a “biological sport”—which is to say, a freak of nature that cannot be explained as anything other than a mysterious accident—or whether they are the products of an accelerated evolution, what man, with the help of nuclear stimulation, might become a million years hence. Such a context, I would suggest, is not merely a convenient backdrop to present creepy children, nor is it a jeremiad for the world we are creating for future generations. Rather, it is a direct expression of the anxiety regarding Childhood itself, at least as the Cold War sometimes figured it. For as Sharon Stephens argues, “Winning the Cold War required not just the development of a vast nuclear arsenal, or superior production (and consumption) in the American economic sphere. It also required the creation of strong and able children, with a firm sense of individual and social boundaries, strong moral values, and clear personal and political loyalties” (Stephens 112).<sup>4</sup> To be more precise, “children were seen as the basic and unquestionable ‘atoms’ of society” (112), the military and economic wealth of its nation, the literal source of its power. Little wonder, then, that the Midwich progeny are not the victims of nuclearism: they are its agents. If the alien-inspired fertilizing gas has impregnated women in at least six countries around the world, that is because the nuclear age has introduced new metaphors for potency and proliferation, metaphors as domestic as they are mili-

tary. The very children who would ensure our future, the children most under threat from nuclear stockpiling, may also be the ones to destroy that future by pressing the button and launching the missiles—or by having missiles launched on their behalf. Little wonder as well that they themselves are a nuclear threat, or that violence occurs when the status of the atom-child or its pod is disturbed. Split the atom and you have a violent explosion.

At a number of levels, then, the damned Children of the Midwich triad are the nightmare image of a dream come true—the dream of a better future for and through our offspring. That nightmare-dream, I am suggesting, hinges ironically on the optimistic improvement narratives arising after World War II and engendered by it. Indeed, for the wealth of anxieties I have already named, the Midwich triad seems to have one specific referent in mind, through which we might read the narrative anxieties regarding childhood: in the 1964 *Children of the Damned*, gifted children around the world come to London to participate in an experiment conducted by UNESCO, the multi-national peace agency created in 1946 to heal a world fractured by recent atrocities. It is the “purpose” and “philosophy” of UNESCO, as penned by Julian Huxley, one of its founding fathers, that can act as an intertext for the Midwich triad as sure as can science-fiction dramas like *The War of the Worlds* or *It Came from Outer Space*; and it is the global Arcadia of UNESCO’s vision that might best frame our modern anxieties about the counterfeit child.

**“We are the world, we are the children”  
—Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie**

Huxley opens his 60-page tract, *UNESCO: Its Purpose and Its Philosophy*, by stating the organization’s two unassailable aims: first, it is to “serve the ends and objects of the United Nations, which in the long perspective are world ends, ends for *humanity as a whole*” (Huxley 5, my emphasis)—a phrase that sounds as a through-line within the *Philosophy*. “And secondly it must foster and promote all aspects of education, science, and culture, in the widest sense of those words” (5). Through education, science, and culture, disunity will become concord. Huxley cites UNESCO’s Constitution as promoting “the ideal of equality of educational opportunity without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social” (6), and without undue allegiance to any particular ideology, such as “the present versions of capitalistic free enterprise, Marxist communism, semi-socialist planning, and so on” (7). The project here is clear, albeit treacherous: Huxley wants to imagine a race of human beings both unified and superior to their current state, a race of human beings not unlike the one imagined by “Marxist communism” or Nazi ideology, but one whose production does not succumb to the misguided impulses of the otherwise “literate” and “thoroughly educated” German people (Huxley 31). A recognizably Huxleyan belief,<sup>5</sup> coupled with a cautious but direct advocacy of eugenics,<sup>6</sup> allows UNESCO’s *Philosophy* to endorse the “One Worldism” that was gaining popularity world-wide.<sup>7</sup> Writes Huxley, “[U]nification in the things of the mind is not only [ . . . ] necessary but can pave the way for other types of unification,” that is, for “shrinking the globe” (17). He salubriously

imagines “the indivisibility of interests of the people who populate the world,” people who are “identical”: for “we are all, at bottom, interested in the same things” (59). Chief among these things is *survival*—an impulse I shall return to for its devastating effect.

If such democratic equalization seems naïve, it can give us pause for other reasons as well—not the least of which is to ask, along with critic Glenda Sluga, which model of human life will serve for this humanitarian whole. While Sluga’s answer to this is the somewhat predictable one—the World Citizen will look like the healthy, educated, middle-class Westerner<sup>8</sup>—the Midwich triad imagines something much less legible. Here is Richard Gayford, the novel’s narrator, describing the children, those inhabitants of the New World Order:

As they approached I found the likeness between them even greater than I had expected. All four had the same browned complexions. The curious lucency of the skin that had been noticeable in them as babies had been greatly subdued by the sunburn, yet enough trace of it remained to attract one’s notice. They shared the same dark-golden hair, straight, narrow noses, and rather small mouths. The way the eyes were set was perhaps more responsible than anything for a suggestion of ‘foreigners,’ but it was an abstract foreignness, not calling to mind any particular race, or region. I could not see anything to distinguish one boy from the other; and, indeed, I doubted whether, had it not been for the cut of the hair, I could have told the boys’ faces from the girls,’ with certainty. (Wyndham 148)

While Gayford raises the specter of foreignness, it is an “abstract foreignness,” that is, a difference that constitutes, in Teresa de Lauretis’s now dated phrase, a state of “(in)difference” (de Lauretis 156). What makes these sixty-one children so different is that they are all similar—“so similar,” in fact, “that most of their ostensible mothers cannot tell them apart” (Wyndham 100). Indeed, *Village of the Damned* presents these children as if they belonged on a poster for Nazi youth, a hymn of praise to Aryan perfection that relies on the generality of type for its particular narrative function.<sup>9</sup> (See Figure 1.)

But we should not take it that some Teutonic master race or communist uniformity is at issue here, for the child Joseph later explains that the communist ultimately serves the State, which is exactly what the children do not do (Wyndham 198). Theirs is what Zellaby will call a “collective-individualism,” a singular unit comprised of discrete parts that collectively mitigate the vulnerabilities of the one. The later *Children of the Damned* makes this collective individualism, this uncanny in/difference even clearer and more globally pronounced, although it does so in reverse. In that film, children of *different* races, from *different* nations and ideologies, come together in a coherent pod, and while they are legible for their racial difference, that’s the only difference we see. (See Figure 2.) They know, feel, see, and speak (or don’t speak) all in the same way. They are, by Huxley’s lights, the One World, or what Marshall McLuhan, sixteen years later, would call the “global village” (McLuhan 25). And as members of the global village, they body forth a Global Village of the Damned.



Figure 1



Figure 2

My reference to McLuhan here is not gratuitous, because his idea of the global village, what Huxley narrates as a “shrinking [of] the globe” (17) through the exchange of information, runs to the heart of another anxiety in the Midwich triad. What most terrifies the adult population of Midwich (and later, in *Children of the Damned*, the UN Embassies in London) is that the children can communicate with one another without recourse to a verbal, spoken language. They share knowledge within their pod—and across other pods globally—by an immediate and non-signifying telepathy. By “non-signifying” I mean that knowledge transfers across subjects without recourse to a Symbolic, a spoken or written word. When one child “knows” something, *all* children “know” it, regardless of where they live on the planet. Despite the fact that three years before Wyndham wrote his novel the UN had officially endorsed Esperanto as a possible new international language, Wyndham’s children don’t need it: there is no *lingua franca* because there is no *lingua*, just unmediated knowledge in a kind of collective consciousness that the children share and the adults can only observe symptomatically.

Is this collective (non)language just another plot device in the narrative of Cold-War paranoia? Perhaps: after all, the talent for sharing knowledge over vast distances does make the children liabilities in the realm of international politics where global peace depends upon countries keeping secrets from other countries. Or, perhaps the collective consciousness is a fictional literalization of Julian Huxley’s dream of the “free exchange of ideas and knowledge” (5), of “advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples, through all means of mass communication [ . . . ] to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image” (6). If Huxley wants to “discover what are the various barriers to free, easy, and undistorted dissemination of news and knowledge between nations, and to see that they are lowered or if possible removed” (59), he need only look as far as the *Children of the Damned*. *They* embody his dream of “One World in the things of mind and spirit” (*League of Nations* quoted in Sluga 399).<sup>10</sup> They are free from the language of any specific peoples or cultural context, the very markers of difference that we currently insist must be brought to peoples globally. If the Children ratchet up Cold-War fears of espionage, they also force us to open up—or even to abandon—the masternarratives we bring to children in the first place. Transcending material specificity, the Children perform a transcending of the Symbolic itself. They are foreigners to the very system of interpretation we deploy to define them.

### Children without Infancy

To consider what is at stake in the children’s wordless communication, or in this fantasy of a world without barrier to the free exchange of word and image, let us return to Edelman for a moment. Edelman’s critical lever in *No Future* is to argue that the Child is a signifier which, willfully disavowing the Law of the Symbolic, is seen to fulfill its own signifying promise and proffer itself as full meaning. To do this, he suggests, the Child-as-signifier must obviate any Lacanian notion that signs themselves produce an unconscious that is both ideologically bound and deconstructively wrought. As I

have already argued, the ability of those damned children to communicate without the use of a particular language renders them a transnational threat of the most obvious political and historically specific kind, but in the context of Edelman's argument, it has profoundly ontological implications as well. It is not just that they don't need language in order to communicate, it is that they seem to have total and unmediated control over the biological aspects of their existence, *without* the sundering agencies of language:

- they manage to get themselves born at the same time;
- their individual wishes are not mere magical thinking but actual performed realities, such as forcing a mother to feed them at their will or to shove her hand in a pot of boiling water if she is the least inattentive, or orchestrating the suicide of any adult who appears as a threat to them;
- and in *Children of the Damned* they can even restore to life one of their pod who has been killed.

In psychoanalytic terms, they register and perform no division between biological *need* and discursive *demand*—the very division that Lacan argued constitutes the irrevocably split subject, that produces an unconscious, and that makes that unconscious (à la Frederic Jameson) *political*. These children evidence no frustrated split between what is necessary for their survival as organisms, their pleasure as sentient beings, and the inadequacies of discourse that demand these necessities from the world around them. And this, I suggest, proffers the damned Child as an important alternative to Lee Edelman's sentimental Child who transcends, *through misprision*, the Law of the Symbolic by guaranteeing the future. These children *make visible* that cultural misprision by casting themselves outside the cultural while being able to destroy the culture that would attempt to contain them. Their status as Children renders them extra-cultural in a way that damns culture to in-significance.

It is that misprised fantasy—its contours, its embodiments, its terrors—that is at the heart of this narrative of Damned Children. It is the fantasy of a full language without the fractures of discourse or *parole*. Another version of this phenomenon is at the heart of Giorgio Agamben's meditations in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*. Much like the Midwich triad, Agamben invites us to

imagine a man born already equipped with language, a man who already possessed speech. For such a man without infancy, language would not be a pre-existing thing to be appropriated, and for him there would be neither any break between language and speech nor any historicity of language. But such a man would thereby at once be united with his nature; his nature would always pre-exist, and nowhere in it would he find any discontinuity, any difference through which any kind of history could be produced. (52)

This "man without infancy" is worth dwelling on because it describes in curiously precise terms how Midwich is thinking about adults and children. According to Agamben, the usual way of referring to infancy is to designate it as the pre-verbal

or the pre-linguistic, that which appears *before* language and which can only be cognized *by* language. In this way, we narrate the binarism child/adult or infant/subject along the same axis as unspeakable/spoken; the human “subject” is always and only an “enunciator [ . . . ] in and through language” (47). For Agamben, this is an error. “The ineffable, the un-said,” he argues, “are in fact categories which belong exclusively to human language; far from indicating a limit of language, they express its invincible power of presupposition, the unsayable being precisely what language must presuppose in order to signify” (4). Against this logocentrism and its narrative prescriptions Agamben wants to posit *infancy*, which he punningly writes as *in-fancy* so as to get at its necessarily imaginary status. I say “necessarily imaginary” because it is the unsayable that is approachable only in language—words given to describe a state prior to words. A state prior to words, but not prior to experience, if “experience” is that which exists only as it is framed by language; rather, *in-fancy* names a plenitude that exists without the restrictive, divisive laws of language. This is what Agamben identifies in the very young child, and where he finds the possibility of a “primary experience.”

A primary experience, far from being subjective, could then only be what in human beings comes before the subject—that is, before language: a ‘wordless’ experience in the literal sense of the term, a human *infancy* [*in-fancy*], whose boundary would be marked by language. (47, brackets original)

This “primal experience,” he suggests, is useful for critiquing the model of history made “natural” by industrial societies and dialectical historiographies; it also resists the privileging of speech over the pleasures of being, from Cartesian philosophy through deconstruction to narratology. Indeed, the primal experience allows us to theorize that “bare life” that Agamben will delineate later in *Homo Sacer*, that which is not defined by materialist politics, even though it remains within them. He continues:

what we must renounce is merely a concept of origin cast in a mould already abandoned by the natural sciences themselves, one which locates it in a chronology, a primary cause which separates in time a before and after. Such a concept of origins is useless to the human sciences whenever what is at issue is not an “object” presupposing the human already behind it, but is instead itself constitutive of the human. The origin of a “being” of this kind cannot be *historicized*, because it is itself *historicizing*, and itself founds the possibility of there being any “history.” (Agamben 49)

It is exactly the concept of renounced origin—a history anchored in, and then outgrown by, the preverbal infant—that our damned Children come to narrativize. No one knows where they came from; no one knows whether they have emerged from evolution or from accident; and (most importantly) no one knows *what* they “know,” *when* they know it (which seems to be always already) or the “terms”—exactly the wrong word—*in which* they know it. They live not “to tell about it,” as the title of James Phelan’s book might suggest, but to tell only each other about it . . . or more accurately, to have already told each other about it. In so doing, the damned Midwich

progeny are made to render visible the fantasy of narrative *historicity* itself, a historicity both ontological and narrative, with the child as its origin. When the fantastical nature of such a historicity is disavowed, we have the spurious Future as Edelman sees it; but its fantastical nature in Midwich also renders history as No Past, because there is no way of historicizing beyond or before what Agamben calls the impasse of infancy in language.

From these claims, Agamben asserts the following statement-question: “A theory of experience could in this sense only be a theory of in-fancy, and its central question would have to be formulated thus: *is there such a thing as human in-fancy? How can in-fancy be humanly possible? And if it is possible, where is it sited?*” (47). Agamben finds such sites in the philosophy of Aristotle and Benjamin, or in the poetry of Rilke. I’m looking elsewhere, obviously, to the Global Village of the Damned. These Children present themselves as adults without infancy, all the while being infants in fancy. But more to the point, they enact the presence of a unifying *language* without the divisive aspects of *speech*: they are subjects without subjection, “at once [ . . . ] united with [their] nature,” and without “discontinuity” between need and demand (52). For children, like animals, are not without language, Agamben contends, they are just without speech, the discursive structures bound by the Law, and which are necessary to articulate the “I.” In other words, the Children, in-fancy, are without the discourse of desire that destroys the “pure experience” (35) which the infant (and perhaps the animal) inhabits. The progeny of Midwich, then, may be seen to enact one more anxious story in the long list I’ve already provided, one more dream that must perforce become a nightmare: this is the dream of the undivided, continuous self constituted in language yet somehow free of language’s binding law. It’s the dream of pure experience, whose nightmare dividend is death.

**“There is for everyone, always, a child to kill.”**  
—Serge Leclair (3)

To put the argument in similar terms, but terms that forecast an outcome different from Agamben’s transcendentalizing philosophies, we might turn, finally, to psychoanalytic theorist Serge Leclair. Leclair’s musings on the question of infant language echo in important ways those of Agamben: “by naming the child *infans*,”<sup>11</sup> Leclair says, “the discourse of repression pounces on the fact that he does not use words, so it can make of him, unfairly, the one who does not speak. [ . . . ] And yet, well before a child can put words together, he speaks and lays bare what speaking means, in an orgy of jubilation and rage, smiles and cries” (59). This *infans*, this bare child before repression, is the child of “primary narcissism”—that is, the pre-symbolic child that we have been considering through Edelman, through Agamben, through Midwich. But it is primary narcissism with a difference. As Leclair and the Midwich triad make clear, these children are not so much narcissists as “*representative[s]*” of primary narcissism (10) in that they are fully articulate, fully realized beings created to *deploy* our vestigial fantasies of primary narcissism; put in narratological terms, they are *stories* of primary narcissism, not primary narcissism itself. Fully aware of his oxymoron,

Leclaire argues that at the heart of our most fundamental anxieties about adulthood and individuation is the phantasmatic image of the child: the child we once were; the child who is forever lost to us, wrested from us by our own self-consciousness; the child who is painfully ghosted in the real children we see; the child who haunts us in such a way that it must perpetually be killed. Says Leclaire, “There is for everyone, always, a child to kill” (3). “Accursed and universally shared,” he writes, “it is part of everyone’s inheritance: the object of a murder as imperative as it is impossible” (10). And that murder is as much a narrative practice as it is a psychological one. Writes Leclaire, “Psychoanalytic practice is based upon bringing to the fore *the constant work of a power of death—the death of the wonderful (or terrifying) child who, from generation to generation, bears witness to parents’ dreams and desires. There can be no life without killing that strange, original image in which everyone’s birth is inscribed*” (2, emphasis original). I’ve already noted how, in *Midwich*, the “parents’ dreams and desires” are ostensibly that their “own baby [. . . ] be perfectly normal, and at the same time superior to all other babies” (Wyndham 98), but in actuality the dream and desire seem to be to produce a child that one can then hate, abject, if not outright kill.<sup>12</sup> And this, I am suggesting, is the child that inhabits the Global Village of the Damned. For this reason, Leclaire will argue, “A child’s death is unbearable” precisely and disturbingly because “it fulfills our most secret and profound wishes” (2).

Nor would the Children of the Damned disagree. As Tom Llewellyn of *Children* interrogates the child Paul for the meaning of the adult-child conundrum, both agents at first appear stymied. Tom asks, “Why are you here, Paul? What do you want?” to which Paul (Clive Powell) replies, “We don’t know” (*Children*). Moments later the UN overseer Mr. Harib (Harold Goldblatt) rephrases the question, “Paul, what is your purpose? Why are you here?” This time Paul answers, “To be destroyed.” This cryptic answer touches upon all the problems I’ve been considering in this essay. Given that the novel and both films end with cataclysmic scenes of child-murder, it is clear that the Children are a kind of collective Girardian scapegoat, a sacrificial death in lieu of the types of universal destruction the narrative triad registers.

In the first instance, the Children are here “to be destroyed” as a way of alleviating the pressures of nuclear anxiety. Children, we remember, are the atoms of society, and Cold-War superpowers stockpiled nuclear armaments ostensibly to protect the future for the children. But the *Midwich* progeny, being counterfeits and counter-narratives, render obvious the other aspect of the atomic child—that it is he who might some day push the button, she who might launch the missile, or they who might be the direct victims of “our” nation’s strategic attack against the enemy. Thus does one of the *Midwich* children hit the nail on the (war)head when, Nietzsche-like, he makes visible the genealogy of British moralism and philanthropy during the Cold War: the children exist to be destroyed not just because they are a threat to social stability but because they test the limits of social leaders who “glow with righteousness on [the children’s] behalf” (Wyndham 199), leaders who will have eventually to admit that the children are deadly. We may rage with Tom Llewellyn and Susan Eliot at the murder of the children at film’s end (an outrage not mitigated by the fact that the killings happened by mistake, through a mechanical error), but we also share in the authorities’ sighs of relief that the children are dead, their threat neutralized.<sup>13</sup>

In another way, the children are here to be destroyed in order to lay bare the mechanics of reproductive futurism and child-murder that I've been considering in the context of the counterfeit Child. As the glut of dark child narratives since the 1950s attests, the young are to be treasured so long as their youth is defined by vacuity and passivity—that is, so long as they give the lie to our express dream for our children of precocity, self-possession, and exceptionality. If they are knowing, they are corrupted, and so they must either be cured or destroyed.<sup>14</sup> The Midwich children enact this dynamic, but they complicate it even further. In the novel the children are destroyed not in the heat of physical battle, but in the warm calm of the domestic. Gordon Zellaby is able to smuggle a bomb into their lair and decimate them only by treating them *as* children: he seduces them with movies and sweets, distracting them by playing on their most banal juvenile characteristics. Likewise at the climax of *Children of the Damned* the children stand together in the innocence and vulnerability of Gandhi-like passive resistance, a pacifist move they have never evidenced before, but one that is essential to naming and disavowing the Ideology of the Child at work here. For Zellaby, for UN Ambassadors, for everyone, there is always a child to kill, and all the better if that child is performing for us the disavowals of futurity.

This Child, as Leclaire has forcefully argued, is the Child that paralyzes us by its ideal status in our personal prehistories. In that context, Paul's answer to the questions of his being takes us to yet another self-contesting story of the human. Remember that Paul was unable to name his *desire*—what it is he *wants*—but he can name his *purpose*, which is a different question altogether. In knowing he is here “to be destroyed,” Paul indicates his recognition of a drive, a purpose beyond the pleasure principle and toward the inexorable pre-cultural exactions of the Lacanian Real. As the novel's children put it to the Chief of Military Intelligence, “This is not a civilized matter, [ . . . ] it is a very primitive matter”:

Neither you, nor we, have wishes that count in the matter—or should one say that we both have been given the same wish—to survive? We are all, you see, toys of the life-force. It made you numerically strong, but mentally undeveloped; it made us mentally strong, but physically weak: now it has set us at one another, to see what will happen. A cruel sport, perhaps, from both our points of view, but a very, very old one. Cruelty is as old as life itself [ . . . ] the life force [ . . . ] won't be denied its blood-sports. (Wyndham 198–201)

Whatever else these precocious children may know, they know their Freud: the life-force *is* ancient cruelty, it *is* the death drive; and the attempt to use our children to forestall or displace the workings of this drive is, on a universal scale, deadly narcissistic blindness. And if they know their Freud, they know him as antagonist to the benign tenor of Julian Huxley's evolutionary philosophies, or Agamben's infant of pure experience. These Children understand with Freud that life drives and death drives are not separate and opposed matters, but together constitute the “vacillating rhythm” we call “survival” (Freud 313).

At the heart of the subjective, at the heart of the domestic, at the heart of the national and transnational in this story, “there is for everyone, always, a child to kill.”

*The Midwich Cuckoos* and its offspring frame this child—and its mandatory killing—as a series of counterfeit children who, I have suggested, imitate and oppose the Salvational Child of the Global Village, the Vulnerable Child of the Cold War, and the Exceptional Child of the smug domestic. The Midwich children, by giving us infancy in fancy, present us with the Child laid bare, the Child beyond discourse, the Child without desire. Faced with this Child, says Serge Leclair, we react thus: “The little interloper must be made to behave, to look, exactly like the picture of good behavior: a first killing perpetrated well-meaningly and in good conscience and whose result (the very image of a nonspeaking *infans* or repeating parrot) will constantly have to be killed in order to retrieve what it represents through its fascinating image, in renewed power and engendering force” (59). That little interloper, that Midwich Cuckoo, is but a counterfeit of a counterfeit: he must not be, but must be *made to look like*. He must be a narration into whose origins we would do well not to pry too deeply. And what he must be made to look *like* is a picture, another counterfeit of this counterfeit signification. The children are not “children” but the representation of the primary narcissistic fantasy of Children—they are the ghost of that which cannot be represented except through counterfeit.<sup>15</sup> That figural displacement, which is at the same time a figural embodiment, allows us to do the work of Child-killing without harming any particular child, or better yet, in order to protect the children for the future (when they will no longer *be* children, but rather will produce them; that is, we protect children for a future of producing children whom we must then protect, often from those who produced them). The Counterfeit Child, within this Global Village of the Damned, betrays the death that drives our attempt to civilize; it represents the fantasy of narcissistic power and pleasure that we must continually indulge and continually kill off. Perversely, that act of Child-murder is necessary if we are to recognize—and thus to narrativize—the otherness of children at all.

## Endnotes

1. Of course, Edelman is expressly *not* making the liberal argument for social rights to be accorded to LGBTQ persons—he is arguing something quite different—but he does make the case that “fidelity to a futurism [is] always purchased at our expense” (4), that is, “at the cost of the places we seek in the bed or the bar or the baths” (29–30).
2. These children and their like might be productively read as agents of Edelman’s *synthomosexuality*, as theorized in *No Future*, but that would be a different essay.
3. For the representational importance of the counterfeit I am indebted to, among other thinkers, Jerrold Hogle, whose work on the counterfeit illuminates how subjects in the gothic—for me, children—are representative signifiers that are also ostentatious fakes of the thing signified. To call these children “counterfeit” is to name the problems they make legible.
4. Stephens is specifically interested in the United States, but her point holds for the British context as well.
5. Besides being the brother of Aldous Huxley, Julian was also the grandson of Thomas Huxley, the friend and champion of Charles Darwin.
6. According to Glenda Sluga, biology remained at the core of Huxley’s thinking about “the na-

- ture of human diversity” (400). Sluga writes at length about Huxley’s engagements with eugenics: “Rehearsing the ideas of other early twentieth-century liberal eugenicists, Huxley proposed promoting the biological reproduction of gifted individuals and discouraging the reproduction of so-called degenerates. [ . . . ] Even if actual world political unity and world planning were far-off ideals, UNESCO would facilitate the collection of scientific knowledge and *midwife* ‘the emergence of a single world culture’ ‘unifying the world mind’” (402–3, my emphasis). Sluga concludes, “Darwin’s theory of evolution provided the template for UNESCO’s contribution to the inevitable march of human progress” (400).
7. Sluga again: “In the first few years of the UN’s operation, delegates and functionaries portrayed world citizenship as the path to permanent world peace, and as a necessary step in the evolution of mankind from tribes to nations, from national consciousness to ‘One World’” (393). She notes the emergence of texts like Wendell Wilkie’s *One World* (1943) and Ralph Barton Perry’s *One World in the Making* (1945).
  8. Writes Sluga: “From the outset, the UN and UNESCO’s world work—for those such as [Julian] Huxley who helped design it and those who observed it—was generated by a worldwide popular revolt against the master race theories of Nazism and ‘the scourge of war,’ and driven by a sense of the extraordinary revolution in ideas and attitudes. Yet, in practice, UNESCO’s allegedly radical cosmopolitan purpose was beholden to the persistence of not only an Enlightenment-coddled trust in the universal power of knowledge and education, but also late nineteenth-century conceptions of evolution and empire” (396–7).
  9. One thinks here of H. Porter Abbott’s observation that “*masterplots* come equipped with *types*—characters whose motivation and personality are an integral and often fixed element of the masterplot. As such, they can be powerful rhetorical tools when activated. They can absorb the complexity of a defendant’s human nature into the simplicity of type” (148). The “defendant” in Abbott’s discussion is Lizzie Borden, a complex character indeed, whereas the Midwich progeny as a mass might be said to be only type, without absorption whatsoever. There would seem to be nothing of individual character in them to absorb.
  10. And, Huxley claimed, the first and “chief task before the Humanities today would seem to be to help in constructing a history of the development of the human mind, notably in its highest cultural achievements” (42); hence UNESCO’s commissioning of a multi-volume, multi-author, multi-national history of mankind that would privilege no national point of view. ‘Highest cultural achievements’ is something of an *idée fixe* for Huxley, and runs as a through-line in the *Philosophy*. “The key to man’s advance [ . . . ] is the fact of cumulative tradition, the existence of a common pool of ideas which is self-perpetuating and itself capable of evolving [ . . . The] more united man’s tradition becomes, the more rapid will be the possibility of progress” (13). According to Poul Duedahl, Huxley’s philosophy for UNESCO was “based on the conviction that history was a continuation of the general process of evolution, leading to some kind of social advance, even progress, featuring increased human control and the conservation of the environment and of natural forces and culminating in a unified world civilization” (104–05).
  11. Leclair’s reference to the *infans* here draws upon the standard psychoanalytic practice of referring to the child as characterized by being prior to language. As Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor puts it, “The Latin term *infans*, derived from the Greek *phèmi* (‘I speak’), means ‘one who does not (or rather, not yet) speak,’ and refers to the baby before the acquisition of speech that marks the entry into childhood. A number of authors (notably Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott) used the term to describe those whose mode of communication is situated at a preverbal level” (n.p.).
  12. There is a moment in John Carpenter’s 1995 remake of *Village of the Damned* in which Dr. Susan Verner (Kirstie Alley) offers all the pregnant women of Midwich access to an abortion that will be paid for by the state, an option never available to the 1950s mothers. Amid rumblings of “child murder,” not one of Carpenter’s women takes up the offer; all decide to go fully to term and have their babies. The reason for this is not clear, but the possibilities are: (1) the film promotes an

anti-abortion agenda, which seems unlikely, given that the children who are born are diegetically slated for death; (2) the film satirizes the anti-abortion agenda, in that these women might have done well not to “choose life”; or (3) neither is the case: rather, the fetuses themselves exert such a life-sustaining control over their surrogate mothers that they refuse the mother the ability to contemplate abortion. This would certainly square with the novel’s point that the child completely usurps the will of the mother and makes her do whatever the child wants. It would also align it with another, quite forgotten film on the same premise, the made-for-TV *The Stranger Within* (1974).

13. Helen Brockelhurst argues that child-observers, from the media salivating over disaster pornography to the architects of UNICEF, all conceptualize children as the “victims” of a politics outside of themselves, they being thoroughly unpolitical to begin with. She suggests that “the ‘political’ and the ‘child’ are constructed so that they appear to be mutually exclusive or contained. The conceptual separation of child and the political makes it possible for the child to be specifically brought in to the political when necessary. A common example is as an emotive *raison d’être* of security practices, when a state is under threat” (140). Such a move, she asserts, “obscure[s] the everyday politicization and nationalization of children’s minds and bodies in other spheres” (140).
14. For the most influential theorizing of this vacuity, see Kincaid’s *Erotic Innocence*.
15. Here again is Jerrold Hogle’s argument that the gothic repeatedly presents us with ghosts whose origins are counterfeit—“artifacts” (105) of history that are spurious or fake, a history that never existed but in retroactive fantasy. See chapter 4 of *The Undergrounds of The Phantom of the Opera* for a full explication of this theory.

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