Monstrous Children and the Society That Makes Them: *Village of the Damned* in Context

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Horror films utilize real fears and anxieties in society to create terror. Whether consciously or unconsciously, films are influenced by the events occurring around the time of their production. Many scholars and writers have noted how horror films reflect society's fears. For example, Robert Paul "Robin" Wood, a film critic and emeritus professor at York University, characterizes horror films as society's "collective nightmare."[1] *New York Times* journalist, Shaila Dewan, shares a similar conclusion that horror films "reflect, or even caricature, society's collective anxieties."[2] Using this lens, the horror genre utilizes different beliefs and norms in society in order to subvert them and create a tense atmosphere that reflects real anxieties.

Monstrous children are a terrifying part of the horror genre that often make audiences uncomfortable and increases terror. Children, however, are not in themselves thought of as terrifying. More often, society views kids as innocent and sometimes the victims of monsters. So, while this pairing of child and monster seems abnormal in contemporary society, children were not always associated with innocence and non-violence. These concepts only began to be associated with kids during the Victorian era. This idea of childhood innocence now permeates our society, and children being depicted as monsters is something abnormal and horrific.

Today, many films, such as *The Village of the Damned*, utilize monstrous children as antagonists. However, there is more to these monstrous children than the subjugation of their expected

innocence. These children further represent the society they were created in. The 1960 and 1995 *Village of the Damned* movies use the concept of monstrous children to subvert the societal expectations associated with Victorian innocence. The films portray the children as threats and as having sexuality, as well as playing into the societal fears of each time period, such as Cold War threats and religious turmoil. In order to understand how these films use both Victorian innocence and historical context to create these monstrous children, this essay will focus on examining the fears shown in each movie, how the children portray societal fears, and how this depicts children as being monsters rather than innocent overall.

The initial concept of childhood innocence emerged in the Victorian era due to the rise of social reformations and the influence of the Church. Before that time, children were virtually considered small adults, and even incredibly young children were expected to be working either in the household, or in jobs outside of it.[3] Many of the outside jobs that these children had were either in workhouses or in various apprenticeships. The conditions of those workhouses, however, were extremely dangerous, which eventually became part of the issues addressed in social reforms.

One of the ties between children and innocence occurred specifically because of people like Herbert Spencer, a British philosopher and social reformer, who began to push for better social and working conditions.[4] These reforms used children as a tool to make changes by turning them into victims of their society.[5] This victimhood status was especially prevalent for children when it came to hunger and social mobility.[6] Children were a prime target for social reform due to the idea that "'childhood' is unique because the child occupies a position that homogenized rather than fragments the social community."[7] This means that everyone has been a child at one point in their lives and can at least relate to each other in this sense.

Along with these social reforms, religious organizations further perpetuated the idea of innocence and purity in children. During the Victorian era, there appeared to be a strong focus on sexuality and sinfulness through sexual acts. Religious groups were also revisiting what the original sin meant and who it was being applied to, which "took on sex-specific forms."[8] As children were separated from adults, they were also separated from the idea of

being sexual beings or even conscious of sexuality. Children began to be seen as "individual beings adults might emulate, but this view was made possible only by obliterating from memory all sexual and aggressive impulses."[9] This idolization of children as role-model-like figures for adults was due to this newly perceived separation of children and sexuality.

These changes, along with the shifting attitude towards kids, saw that children's "value was no longer linked to property; now [the child] was understood to be the priceless center of the family."[10] And from here, the idea of childhood innocence only grew, and its effects continue to be seen today in how children are treated and perceived. Children are now viewed as innocent, pure, loving, naïve, and harmless. Due to this now deeply ingrained idea, subverting the expectations of the innocent child motif creates much of anxiety in viewers, especially as childhood begins to appear "almost sacred and nostalgic."[11] With new notions of childhood innocence society also develops the trope of the monstrous child who transgresses against the status quo.

While Victorian innocence did establish the foundation on which children can be utilized as monsters, there are multiple other ways in which children represent fears and anxieties. For example, children are utilized as monsters because they are set apart from adults in body and mind, making them targets for being turned into the "other." They are further "othered" from adults because adults have moved away from a state of innocence into a state of experience. Besides being "othered" in relation to adults, children also become monsters by diverging from expected behavior associated with Victorian innocence.[12]

The function of monstrous children in the media is to play on the fears and anxieties of society. While the appearance of monstrous children in media is continuous, the specific fears and anxieties they represent shift over time as societal concerns change. The struggle between the child as innocent versus the child as a monster, as well as the shifting anxieties of society over time, appears in the 1960 film *The Village of the Damned* and its later 1995 remake. Both films follow the same basic plot, where a village mysteriously falls asleep, then awakens a few hours later, only to discover that every female of child-bearing age is pregnant, even the virgins. These babies grow at a quick rate and after they are born, have a slightly strange appearance,

with blonde hair and unusual eyes. The group of kids are also highly intelligent, have a hive-mind mentality, and can read minds and influence others' actions. They end up terrorizing the village and causing the deaths of multiple people. This leads the adults to try to destroy the children, which ends up occurring at the 1960 film's conclusion.[13] However, the 1995 version deviates from this ending, when one of the children, David, is saved by the adults.[14] Aside from this, there are plenty of small details about the children and other aspects of the film that differ, which are direct reflections of what is going on in the world during the creation of each film.

The original 1960 *Village of the Damned* was created in the wake of World War II and in the midst of the Cold War, so when it was produced, it played into related fears. One of the fears following WWII was a threat to the traditional family. This anxiety stemmed from the emphasis put on home life and the traditional nuclear family, which had been previously disrupted during the war. Men were now back from war but were slightly displaced by women, who were now working outside of the household. This change in traditional roles became an opportunity for the monstrous child to make an appearance in the media.

This era saw that children were once again used to "exemplify a range of psychological and socio-cultural issues."[15] Children were seen as products of their environment, family, and society.[16] This meant that these monstrous children were a reflection of what was around them, rather than of the child itself. In relation to the nuclear family, monstrous children seem to appear in families where the traditional structure is threatened, such as the father not acting as the head of the family or the mother not having a traditional role inside the household. *The Village of the Damned* demonstrates this breakdown of the traditional family structure, especially when it comes to the more stereotypically masculine roles. The first threat to the nuclear family occurs when the women in the village are all impregnated with children that did not belong to their husbands, which usually suggests infidelity.[17] The fact that even virgins got pregnant seems to reduce the agency of the traditional male role even further in these new emerging families. Furthermore, after the children do arrive and grow, they begin to dominate the village and their families. For example, David, one of the featured monstrous children, insists on his independence and moving out, and says that his parents could

not change his mind.[18] Here, the entire family dynamic is broken down as fathers raise children that are not theirs and the children make decisions over the family.

While this theme is present in the film, the most prominent fear that is played into concerns the Cold War nuclear threat. The film introduces this fear at the beginning with an abundance of military activity around the village. It is initially thought that military exercises may have caused the people to pass out.[19] Even the birth of the children is later thought to potentially have been caused by radiation from outside of Earth.[20] The film also mentions that another village filled with similar children had been destroyed with nuclear weapons due to the threat that the children posed.[21] Along with the Cold War nuclear fears, the fear of communists and the leakage of potentially crucial information also appear through the monstrous children of the movie, as "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."[22] The idea that the children could also make their parents defect to communism plays into the concept of children as liabilities. In general, communism in the eyes of American values was a threat to the overall family, not just the children. *The Communist Manifesto* calls for the "abolition [a*ufhebung*] of the family" which can be seen in the film.[23] The children were created outside of the means of the traditional family and the children demonstrate a strong desire to be separate from their families. In doing so, they reject the notion of family when they reject their parents' affection and move out to operate independently at a vulnerable age. This also ties into the technology and alien anxieties that appear, as the kids exhibit strange powers and high intelligence, along with slightly strange appearances that define them as not wholly human.

In regard to the children's appearance, another overlap from the World War II period appears. The children are depicted as being blonde with distinct eyes, extremely intelligent, and superior to the rest of the village. This characterization 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."[24] The children's appearance gives the audience

recollections of the atrocities of eugenics and Nazi rhetoric regarding a supreme and pure race.

Despite all the societal fears that went into the creation of the monstrous children in *The Village of the Damned*, they are still held to a certain standard of Victorian innocence by other adults in the film. Although the children present themselves as unemotional miniature adults who dress formally, talk formally, and insist on their independence away from their parents, some adults continue to believe the children have some form of innocence. Professor Gordon Zellaby and his Anthea are two such characters. Professor Zellaby even tries to defend the children when others call them bad or want to lock them away.[25] Professor Zellaby believes that the children do not know that what they are doing is wrong and they need to be taught morals. The manner in which the children kill other villagers challenges the idea of Victorian innocence since they are responsible for the deaths even though they are not carrying out the violent action themselves; instead, they cause the victims to become violent and harm themselves. Here, the idea of the monstrous child develops through the villagers' initial belief that children are innocent until that belief gets overshadowed by the actual behavior of the children, who then become the antagonists of the film.

The 1960 version of *The Village of the Damned* played into the post-WWII and Cold War fears in the creation of the movie and depiction of monstrous children. While these children represented America's anxieties, because of the societally ingrained idea of childhood innocence, their characterization further represents the reversal of those closely held societal norms. The 1995 remake of this movie works with these monstrous children as well; however, a different historical context influences the specific depiction of the storyline.

The 1995 *Village of the Damned* was influenced by the events of the 1970s to the 1990s. This era saw an even greater number of monstrous children being portrayed in horror films.[26] Once again, it seems that the monstrous children that appear in the horror films of this era continued to be used as a tool for social commentary, whether it concerned family structure, religion, medical drugs, or even media. The film also took place after the 1980's Satanic Panic, which brought a new wave of fear into the American public about child abuse and how children could be potentially influenced or

victimized by cults and other adults that may promote satanic worship or a lack of morals. All of this, while not directly relayed in the film, does account for some of the increased moral concerns portrayed.

The 1995 *Village of the Damned* has plenty of aspects that remain consistent with the 1960 movie, while also presenting the story in a different way that reflects the historical context of the differing era. In the film, while potential nuclear weapons and radiation are mentioned, they are quickly dismissed and replaced with the assertion that the children are aliens. This is hinted at first by a shadow flying over the village, as well as the strange appearance and abilities of the children.[27] Their alien origin is later confirmed by the appearance of one of the deceased babies that did not survive birth.[28]

This film also has extremely religious undertones which reflect the more conservative and Christian concerns of the time. The period from the 1970s to the 1990s saw a lot of activism from the Christian Right, that went from being a social movement to "an institutionalized political player."[29] This was reflected in the government during 1992 at the Republican National Convention, which had speakers promoting the idea of a "cultural war" that involved a threat to "Judeo-Christian traditions."[30] Furthermore, during this same conference, people spoke out against abortion, homosexuals, and mothers working outside of the household.[31] The movie reflects aspects of this movement in the town meeting scene, when the women, with their husbands or fathers present, are given the option of aborting the mysterious fetuses. When given this option, murmurs break out all over the room and the comment "that would mean killing babies" is clearly heard.[32] The film later indicates that none of the women got an abortion even given the uncertainty of the situation. This scene plays out with a conservative anti-abortion view that appeared in response to the 1973 passing of Roe v. Wade and continued with conservative groups' desire to see the decision overturned.

Another scene featuring the baptism of the babies also portrays the religious nature of the film. None of the children had any abnormal reactions to the baptism, which usually occurs when monstrous children are subjected to Christian rituals.[33] Because there is no abnormal reaction, the scene has little contribution to the overall plot; it does, however, function in two ways. First, it shows

the children growing, although viewers do not know exactly how much time has passed. Second, the scene emphasizes the rituals and Christian beliefs of the town. Further supporting the portrayal of Christian ideals, the film references proverbs and Christian philosophy, such as in a discussion between Dr. Alan Chaffee and the children, and again when the preacher's wife is rallying a group of villagers to kill the children after they killed her preacher husband.[34]

In addition to the different emphases on religiosity, the 1960 and 1995 films differ in several other ways. As mentioned previously, nuclear weapons no longer seemed to be as extreme a concern for society with the end of Cold War, and while the children's appearance remain similar, their hair is white instead of blonde. This seems to imply some distance between the 1995 version of the monstrous children and the idea of eugenics.[35] Likewise, while the 1995 version features a similar threat against traditional family structures as that of the 1960 version, the fear manifests in a slightly different manner, where the children punish their parents and command the village. The 1995 children are seen as a more prominent physical threat to their parents, as four adults are killed under the control of the children.

The main difference between the plot of these two films is the inclusion of a redemption arc for one of the kids, David, in the 1995 version.[36] The children are unemotional in the film and lack compassion, something that Dr. Chaffee points out and at one point tries to fix by teaching them morals.[37] While initially the film implies that changing the children would be impossible, David becomes the exception through the simple question of "what is empathy?"[38] This character gains empathy over the course of the film and even bonds with Dr. Chaffee over the loss of their partners, which for David is a still-born baby, and for Dr. Chaffee is his wife who is killed by their child.[39] This moment of empathy is what convinces Dr. Chaffee to try to teach the children morals and leads the adults to save David in the end.

Another aspect that turns David from being a monstrous child to one that exhibits some aspects of Victorian innocence is his lack of a partner or mate, as mentioned previously. The stillborn baby was meant to be David's partner, and there is an emphasis on these pairings. David, however, is alone. The other alien children imply

that he is less important because he does not have his partner. This isolation, paired with the urgency the children have for their group to survive and continue their species, emphasizes a sexual component related to these child monsters. Since David does not have his pairing, however, there is an absence of this sexual component, allowing him to gain redemption.

This redemption demonstrates how Victorian innocence has affected the perception and treatment of children in the film. The influence appears even stronger here due to the religiosity of the 1995 film. Starting at the pregnancy stage, when abortions of these unexplained fetuses are offered to the women, the village takes on the mindset that the babies are innocent and should not be harmed or terminated. Furthermore, even after the children are deemed monstrous and seek independence from their families, the parents still try to perform protective and caring actions. For instance, they try to hold their child's hand when leaving school, attempt to brush the child's hair before bed, and even try to prevent the kids from leaving home to move to an old barn.[40] These actions show how the adults maintain at least some beliefs regarding what innocent and harmless children would need from their parents.

Similarly, the belief in Victorian innocence shines through when David's mother continuously tries to protect him from harm. Although he is one of the monstrous children who insists on his independence from his mother's care, she still views him as someone to be protected and even claims that he is different from the others, due to his developing sense of empathy. After saving David from the same fate as the other kids, she flees with him in order to protect him from the fallout of the destruction and deaths that the children caused.[41]

Overall, both movies provide examples of how the monstrous child trope is used to reflect societal fears and social norms. Despite the time difference between the productions, both films connect to the rise of childhood innocence in the Victorian Era. Children used as a tool to make commentary about social situations created the image of innocent childhood, and in that same manner, the monstrous child emerged as a commentary on society. The children in *The Village of the Damned* are representative of how the Victorian idea of childhood innocence that society has adopted can be twisted to produce anxieties and fears that resonate with

audiences within a specific historical context. These monstrous children are created due to a perversion of their perceived innocence, and when that perversion incorporates the prevalent fears of the film's cultural context, the monstrous child becomes even more of a threat.

Notes

[1] Wood, "An Introduction," 174.
[2] Dewan, "Do Horror Films?"
[3] Calhoun, "Childhood's End," 28.
[4] Berry, *The Child,* 1.
[5] Ibid*,* 13.
[6] Ibid*,* 11.
[7] Ibid*,* 4.
[8] Drotner, "Secular Moralities," 79.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Berry, *The Child,* 104.
[11] Bohlmann and Moreland, *Monstrous Children,* 19.
[12] Austin, *Monstrous Youth,* 1-2.
[13] Rilla, *Village of the Damned.*
[14] Carpenter, *Village of the Damned.*
[15] Bohlmann and Moreland, *Monstrous Children,* 109.
[16] Ibid, 103.
[17] Rilla, *Village of the Damned*, 00:24:49- 00:25:10.
[18] Ibid, 00:51:44-00:52:07.
[19] Ibid, 00:19:21-00:20:17.
[20] Ibid, 00:45:48 – 00:46:25.
[21] Ibid, 00:59:28-00:59:57
[22] Bruhm, "The Global Village," 164.
[23] Engel and Marx, "Communist Manifesto."
[24] Bruhm, "The Global Village," 162.
[25] Rilla, *Village of the Damned*, 00:42:14-00:42:20.
[26] Austin, *Monstrous Youth,* 81.
[27] Carpenter, *Village of the Damned*, 00:02:13-00:02:27; 00:36:11-00:36:35.
[28] Ibid, 1:03:34.
[29] Moen, "The Changing Nature," 21.
[30] Buchanan, "Address to the Republican National Convention."
[31] Ibid.
[32] Carpenter, *Village of the Damned,* 00:26:40.
[33] Ibid, 00:34:58-00:35:47.
[34] Ibid, 00:56:30, 01:14:46.
[35] While this aspect does seem diminished, I would not say that the rhetoric has completely disappeared during this time. It simply is not as prominent as other aspects.
[36] While this is not noted in other scholarship I have viewed, it is interesting that in this overtly religious film, the boy shares the name of the biblical King David and experiences a similar redemption.

[37] Carpenter, *Village of the Damned,* 01:11:21-01:11:44.
[38] Ibid*,* 00:49:06.
[39] Ibid, 00:54:45.
[40] Ibid*,* 00:47:51; 00:48:21; 01:06:38; 01:08:22.
[41] Ibid*,* 01:32:07.

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