

# The Right One or the Wrong One?: Configurations of Child Sexuality in the Cinematic Vampire

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"They gave us new faith in the nasty tonics of childhood,  
pungent, murky liquids promising  
shining eyes, strong teeth, glowing skin,  
and we silently vowed to swallow ever after."  
(Strange, *Childhood* 896)

## Introduction

This paper argues that the figure of the "undead" or immortal child in recent vampire films configures the ambivalence of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century western culture on the nature of childhood. Two films in particular illustrate the extremes of this almost Manichean dichotomy between the inherent innocence of youth and the sexually aware and libidinally motivated child. The critically acclaimed Swedish vampire film, *Let the Right One In* by Tomas Alfredson (2008), and the largely neglected *Let Me In* by Matt Reeves (2010) are both inspired by the same story by John Ajvide Lindqvist. Both feature a bullied 12-year-old boy who befriends a vampire - who is also 12 but "for a long time" - with dramatic consequences. Though Reeves' film is billed as a remake of the earlier one it is the differences between them that make not only the imperative of the films dissimilar but also constructs completely oppositional figurations of the childhood portrayed. These differences are not in terms of plot but in the structure of certain scenes and the naming and significance of the characters involved.

Whist the disparity between the two films can be attributed to cultural difference in the setting of the two films, there are enough similarities of intention and precedent, that will be explained later, which form a link of intention between them. Not least of these is an overwhelming sense of adult nostalgia and idealisation of childhood that draws a correlation to those exact same emotions that informed the cultural construction of youth during the Victorian period. Here, it can be argued, the state of childhood became a separate and distinct category in itself. As such, it will prove valuable to look at particular configurations of youth from that period and the ways in which they may inform contemporary notions of the pre-adolescent. The child in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became caught between earlier idealised notions of innocence and pre-lapsarian savagery and that of the little adult, who was sexually mature and manipulative (Jenks 5). This situation, in a broad sense, is not so dissimilar in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but, as I shall argue, the vampire child offers a unique interpretation of this situation. The undead youth, in being immortal, enacts the configuration of childhood over and over again, altering it to the particular age that it lives in. As such, it then becomes a locus for the tensions between individual desire and social expectation, revealing the ways that both childhood and the child change or remain the same. The vampire within these films, particularly in the two examples chosen, then, also allows the child that it befriends to choose the nature of the childhood that it enacts. The vampire child, then, acts as both a mirror and an embodiment of what the child is as well as what its identity, whether as a child or an individual agent, was and might yet become.

## This Thing Called Childhood

"Yes Claudia," he said. "They're sick and they're dead. You see, they die when we drink from them." He came towards her and swung her up into his arm again. We stood there with her between us. I was mesmerized by her, by her transformed, by her every gesture, She was not a child any longer, she was a vampire child. (Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* 104)

The notion of the vampire can be seen to be as mythical and as socially constructed as that of childhood. Nina Auerbach, in her book *Our Vampires Ourselves*, posits that every age produces the vampire that it needs and "that our lives are implicated in theirs." (Auerbach 9) This sentiment is similarly expressed by Jacqueline Rose in her work on Peter Pan where she says: "so often it has seemed the case that what is at stake in an image of the child is not the child first and then the image, but the child as the most fitting representative for the gratifying plentitude of the image itself." (Rose 139) The child and the vampire then become expressions both of the times that they live in, or are produced by, more than the entity they are themselves; individuality being subservient to social expectation and categorisation.

Curiously, both can be seen to have taken the form we know of today during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The notion of childhood became more formalised in the Victorian age, as noted by Chris Jenks: "It would appear that the idea of childhood only emerged at a comparatively late stage in the historical process. This is an idea propounded by many theorists including Hoyles who plainly stated: 'Both childhood and our present day nuclear family are comparatively recent inventions.'"<sup>1</sup> Its place within the social space is further explained by Carolyn Steedman: "in the late nineteenth century, and in the years up to the First World War, childhood was reconceptualised in British society – that is to say, children became the subjects of legislative attention and formed the basis of various accounts of social development as they had not done before." (Steedman 62) As such, the category of childhood became formalised to both regulate and contain a societal psychic need as much as an actual group of individuals. The revenant too fulfilled such a need as it changed from the undead relation returning from the grave, as seen in folklore of Eastern Europe, to the suave aristocrat that was at home at a sophisticate dinner party as he was in a gothic castle. As Carol Senf comments: "by the end of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century, most literary vampires have lost the gross physical characteristics and the mysterious behavior of their predecessors in folklore." (Senf 26) Both the child and the vampire can be seen to manifest a part of society, whether real or metaphorical, that expressed something very specific to the times and culture that produced them but which also required containment.

Although the confluence of these two figures is a fairly recent one, most predominantly seen in Claudia from Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* from 1976,<sup>2</sup> it is one that proves extremely fruitful in examining the ambivalence contained within any societal construction that is imposed upon a group rather than it being one that they have chosen for themselves. Not least within this is the fact that the vampire child is predominantly, though not always, "made" by an adult and once turned, the child never ages and so remains in a youth-like state forever more. As I have mentioned elsewhere, in regard to the never aging teenager Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* saga: "the boyhood that he performs is born of repetition and experience, articulated throughout his continual high school attendance and graduations by the wearing of appropriate attire and maintenance of culturally

appropriate stances and attitudes." (Bacon, *Lost Boys* 160) The vampire child, then, is more aware of the nature of the social construction of the category that it is part of and the various, often conflicting, aspects of its enactment. The disparity of roles that the undead youth has and is expected to perform intimates both a loss of childhood but also a latent sense of dissonance within it. The sense of loss is possibly more a loss of meaning of the term due in part, particularly as portrayed in popular media of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to the blurring of where the boundaries of childhood actually are. As Neil Postman observes:

the merging of the taste and style of children and adults, as well as in the changing perspectives of relevant social institutions such as the law, the schools, and sports. And there is evidence of the 'hard' variety – figures about alcoholism, drug use, sexual activity, crime etc., that imply a fading distinction between childhood and adulthood. (Postman 120)

Further, as Chris Jenks notes, an awareness of what childhood actually means in terms of cultural context is more prevalent:

More recently, however, a growing number of sociologists and anthropologists have attended to the dissonance which exists between children's own experiences of being a child and the institutional form which childhood takes (see James and Prout 1990; James 1993). This has sharpened a theoretical focus on the plurality of childhoods, a plurality evidenced not only cross-culturally but also within cultures. At the very least, it is suggested, the experience of childhood is fragmented and stratified, by class, age, gender and ethnicity, by urban or rural locations and by particularized identities cast for children through disability or ill health. (Jenks 122)

These disparities and tensions inherently form part of the thematic at the heart of both the films to be considered. More strikingly, it is the cultural similarities in the views of childhood depicted in both that then give them a common starting point from which their respective visions diverge.

Each film, *Let the Right One In* and *Let me In*, is an adaptation of the book *Let the Right One In* (*Låt den rätte komma in*) by John Ajvide Lindqvist (2004), although it is arguable that Reeves' film is more of an interpretation of Alfredson's movie. The films and the novel also display the nostalgia of their respective directors/author for their childhood in the 1980's, the time period in which the story of all three are set.<sup>3</sup> The remoteness of the settings away from main cities or towns separates them from the excesses of their respective cultures but also informs the main characters of each with a sense of longing to escape from where they are. Yet the culture they are part of seem, or are, depicted as being very similar. This is a point worth elaborating on as it can be argued that the thematics of cultural representation here, particularly in the two films, comes from cinematic precedent rather than actual cultural history. As such, Alfredson's film can be seen to be informed by earlier Swedish movies which themselves quote American cinematic influences. Of note in this regard are *Show Me Love* (*Fucking Ämäl*) by Lukas Moodyson from 1998 and *Frostbiten* (*Frostbite* in English) by Anders Banke from 2006.<sup>4</sup>

*Show Me Love* shows a budding lesbian sexual relationship between teenage girls and creates a very similar atmosphere between the young lovers as seen in *Let the right One In*. *Frostbite*, an out-and-out horror film, features both teenagers and

vampires, and is also set in a remote location and equates youthful *ennui* with the appearance of the monster just as Alfredson's film does. The representation of Swedish youth in the two earlier films is strongly linked to that of popular American youth culture, and highlights the commonalities between both not least in the music and cultural icons included in them (rockbands, posters etc.). This is largely to increase the market for both films, and *Frostbitten* especially was intended for wide distribution and was the most famous Swedish vampire film before *Let the Right One In*. Consequently, beyond obvious cultural difference between the Swedish and American there is a commonality of inspiration and intention not just in their respective sources but in the knowledge that the finished work is intended for a much wider audience than that proscribed by national boundaries. The same is largely true of Lindqvist's novel which was a best-seller in Sweden, and was quickly translated into several languages. As such, the latency of the vampire-child depicted contains both these internalised and externalised aspects that either reveal or mask the desires of the society that constructs them; but to see just how this works for the revenant, and the childhood they manifest, a closer look at exactly how each of the films does this is necessary; and so it is time to invite the vampire in.

## Let Them In

And when at last it does  
I'd say you were within your rights to bite  
The right one and say, "what kept you so long ?"  
"What kept you so long ?"  
(Morrissey, *Let the Right One Slip In* 1992)

The novel *Let the Right One In*, or *Låt den rätte komma in* as it is in Swedish, tells of a young boy Oskar who is bullied at school. He is befriended by a vampire who subsequently saves him from being drowned and they run away together. John Ajvide Lindqvist supposedly got his inspiration for his novel, or the title at least, from a song by Morrissey quoted above. The story is set in Sweden of the early 1980's and the song that inspired it was not released until almost ten years later. The retrospective nature of the story's inspiration reveals not only the vagaries of nostalgia, which Lindqvist cites as being one of the reasons behind the novel, but also the nature of adult projection onto the past and, subsequently, their memories of their own childhood. The author notes the many references to his own upbringing in Sweden at that time, and there are many instances of cultural icons that particularly place it within a knowable and recognizable place and time. The Rubik's cube, which is still popular today, plays a prominent part in the novel and the subsequent films, hinting at a universality in its depiction of childhood and its concerns and anxieties. As such, it enacts a kind of nostalgia that not only reviews the past but instills it with a knowledge and experience that has only been accrued over time. There is then a sense of the adult in the child, as we read the novel and also as we watch the films. In this way, the figure of the fictional child enacts what Perry Nodelman observes in his book on *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*:

The nostalgic and idyllic qualities of these texts relate their conception of childhood to other forms of Edenic beginnings and mythic pasts. They invite children to view themselves in the terms by which the Euro-American culture

from which they emerge has traditionally viewed its own historical past—in the process of experiencing a paradise they will eventually inevitably lose and regret the loss of. In this way they encourage children to be critical of adult thinking and thus undermine their own efforts to encourage it. (Nodelman 79)

The childhood we see is not so much idyllic but idealised, itself held in a state of unchanging stasis which is shown in the figure of Oscar.

At 12 he is still a child. He lives with his mother in a characterless suburb of Stockholm called Blackeberg, and, seemingly, has no friends. After school he always plays alone but during the day he is constantly hounded by a group of bullies at school. Rather than using his name they call him "Piggy" and Micke, their leader, takes every opportunity he can to humiliate and physically abuse Oskar. Consequently, Oskar seems to live in a state of limbo - emasculated by the bullies; he is neither a boy nor girl, and with no friends and little meaningful contact with grown-ups, his parents included, he is constructed as outside normal life. This otherness sees him reflecting the cold and frozen landscape around him, which Alfredson's film captures perfectly. It is worth noting that the novel differs significantly to the film in certain aspects, not least in its representation of paedophilia. What the film hints at, with the special relationship between the vampire child and its "familiar", a middle aged man, is made explicit in the Lindqvist's book. Consequently, the monstrosity of the vampire is linked to the monstrosity of that relationship, and is further established through the fact that the "familiar," Hakan, becomes an undead monster that tries to kill the vampire later in the story. That said, Lindqvist himself was the script writer for the Swedish film, and so a certain continuity of intent is implied between the two representations.

The opening shots of the movie *Let the Right One In* show a black screen with snow falling, and slowly we see the ghostly figure of a young boy walking to a window. The boy is deathly pale, with blond hair, and naked except for his white pants. This ethereal figure turns out to be Oskar. The silent otherworldly nature of the scene is intensified by Oskar leaving ghostly hand prints on the window caused by the heat coming from his body; he is indeed a spectral presence in a ghostly world. Looking out of the window to the courtyard of the housing block he lives in, everything is regular, mundane and characterless; this is a world out of time. This feeling of being frozen or "caught" in time is explained by Ludwig Wittgenstein: "if by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present." (Wittgenstein §6.4311) The only consolation that Oskar finds whilst he is trapped in this eternal present is dreaming of killing his tormentors. We see this very early in the film where Oskar, alone and not far from the building where he lives, stabs a tree trunk shouting "squeal like a pig, so squeal," enacting what his tormentors do to him everyday. After one encounter, where fear has caused him to wet himself, he stands alone in the school toilets: "he twisted his face into a grimace until it hurt, distorted his voice by making it raspy and as low as he could... 'Kill them, Kill them. Kill them.'" (Lindqvist 104) What this creates, though, is the feeling of Oskar being an innocent, instinctual creature - not human; not adult; but the child as a little beast driven by innate needs and fears but not scheming or knowing in his compulsions. Alfredson's *Let the Right One In* by stripping away many of the peripheral plots makes this point even more clearly, and it is something that then becomes reflected in the figure of the vampire - for if Oskar can only dream of violence then the vampire, Eli, is this made manifest.

This link and equivalence between them is constructed earlier in the film when after enacting out his revenge of his tormentors on the base of a tree Eli arrives with

her "father" to move into the same block of flats that Oskar lives in. As Anne Billson notes in her book on the film: "Thus the first sightings of Eli follow immediately on from his [Oskar's] fantasies of violent revenge." (Billson 32) Eli is brought forward, or made to appear, by Oskar's instinctual emotions of fear, anger and revenge.<sup>5</sup> Eli, then, is a mirror made flesh of Oskar's emotional state of being - held in stasis, unsexualised but innately savage; the pre-lapsarian child that is beyond societal control or influence. As Billson further comments: "far from being the powerful, sexually attractive and glamorous creatures of many latterday vampire movies, the lives they lead are the lives of shunned outcasts – miserable, shabby and friendless." (Billson 57) The otherness of Oskar and Eli comes precisely from their nature as outcasts. Oskar in particular rarely seeks the help of adults directly, largely because they are ineffectual and alien to the world that he inhabits. Even his gym teacher, Mr. Avila, who promises to be a caring and reliable figure, eventually lets him down just as all the other adults in his life.

Beyond the world of adults and their control, Oskar represents what Spenser Cahill observes about children in public spaces: "young children are not only considered in danger when in public places but a danger as well." (Cahill 395) Eli too is dangerous because of her/his outside-ness. This is shown specifically in her/his age and in what he/she exactly is. After being hugged by Oskar, Eli says to him "Oskar, I'm not a girl" to which he replies "Oh – but do you want to go steady or not?" This innocence of his is shown again later in an exchange between him and Eli:

Oskar: "Are you a vampire?"

Eli: "I live off blood... Yes."

O: "Are you... dead?"

E: "No ... can't you tell."

O: "But are you old?"

E: "I'm twelve. But I've been twelve for a long time."<sup>6</sup>

J. M. Tyree notes that the book takes this even further when Eli says: "'I'm nothing,' Eli explains in the novel. "Not a child. Not old. Not a boy. Not a girl. Nothing." (Tyree 36) Consequently, their innocence and otherness is seen as a rejection of the adult world that originally created them for the notion of their respective childhoods being an adult construction is implicitly made in the film. Indeed, on many levels, it is possible to see the versions of childhood that Oskar and Eli live as being the result of adult interventions, or lack thereof, in their lives. Oskar's arrested emotional state, though exacerbated by the bullies, can be seen to be based in the remoteness of his parents. Even more so, Eli was made immortal by an adult. A scene from the novel, which is not shown in the film, sees Oskar sharing Eli's thoughts and seeing a noble man ordering his servants to castrate the then 12-year-old child, and then drinking the youngster's blood: "the man bites. And drinks, Bites. And drinks."<sup>7</sup> (Lindqvist 391) This violence enacted upon him/her by an adult created the vampire who is held in time forever at the moment he/she was turned. Interestingly, the book explicitly links this and Eli's later relationships to pedophilia. As a child in an adults' world Eli has to rely on male adults to gather food and look after him/her, and so grooms willing candidates through the use of sexual favours. The film, whilst never specifying the nature of the relationship between Eli and her/his "father", Hakan, steers clear of the social taboo that the novel makes explicit.

Consequently, the two children rescue each other from the states of childhood that have been imposed upon them. At the end of the film Eli rescues Oskar from the bullies acting in the role of protector, one which neither of his parents are capable of.

And Oskar becomes friend and "father" to Eli. As T. M. Tyree comments: "The film's premise builds up carefully through small gestures: they care for each other very deeply, each has saved the other's life, and they are bound by a kiss in blood." (Tyree 36) The natural child then permanently remains outside society, living in an idealised state that cannot and should not be touched or interfered with. This form of nostalgia sees childhood as a golden moment frozen in time forever; an inalienable category which must remain so into the future (a point which is made in the final scene of Alfredson's film, explained below). In saving Oskar, Eli has, quite literally, ripped the bullies, and his old life, to pieces and so, to escape retribution, we see them leaving Blackeberg on a train. Or rather: we see Oskar sitting alone in a train compartment with a large box in front of him. We realise that the box contains Eli - being a vampire he/she cannot be exposed to sunlight, - and it is in fact as if the happy couple goes off to a new life. However, we do not hear where the train is going, and the golden glow of the carriage, in direct contrast to the coldness of the rest of the film, gives it a dream like quality. It then becomes not a trip to a new town and a new life but a closed-off bubble that will forever remain the same. The carriage itself is the manifestation of an idealised childhood which through never changing also never allows the child or the vampire to change, being both equally immortal and locked together forever. Matt Reeves' film though paints a very different picture. But is the childhood he envisions any less undead than the one we have just seen?

### **R.S.V.P**

"I am a mirror. When people look at me they see themselves. It is not necessarily a part of themselves that they want to recognise, but it is there."  
(Somtow, *Vampire Junction* 133)

As with many remakes, Matt Reeves' film is exactly the same but completely different than Alfredson's. Not least of which it now takes place in Los Alamos, New Mexico. In their ways Blackeberg and Los Alamos are quite similar: both are faceless and recently constructed communities - Blackeberg is a suburb of Stockholm built in the 1950s, and Los Alamos was largely constructed to house the workers in the American nuclear project, the Manhattan Project, that was undertaken in the National Laboratories built there.<sup>8</sup>

Equally, the two "children" of the story, Owen and Abby, though made by the adults around them, are even more distanced from the world of grown-ups. This is most obviously shown in the titles given to the adult figures in the film, as many of them have no names at all, and are only known as "The Father" or "The Policeman". But it is also seen in how the children act when the adults are not around, and which marks them out as very different "children" than Oskar and Eli. This difference can be seen in Allison James and Chris Jenks' comment in their work on childhood criminality:

Children are further constrained not only by implicit socializing rules which work to set controls on behaviour and limits on the expression of unique intent, but also by customary practices which, through the institution of childhood, articulate the rights and duties associated with 'being a child'. For western children these are...still largely the rights and duties of the innocent abroad. (James & Jenks 318)

For Owen and Abby are not innocents either abroad or at home. Owen in particular is shown stealing from his mothers purse, and rather than staring wistfully out into the courtyard of the flats where he lives, as Oskar did in *Let the Right One In*, Owen uses a telescope to spy on his neighbours. This scene is important to events later, and it begins with Owen, semi-naked, wearing a clear plastic mask.<sup>9</sup> He has a knife, which he has stolen from the kitchen, and enacts the scene of taking revenge on his tormentors, as Oskar did in the earlier film. But here it contains far more menace. Looking at himself in a mirror Owen says: "Are you a little girl? Huh? Are you scared?" Rather than being a somewhat ineffectual attempt at agency Owen's actions contain real, darker menace. The mask he wears shows him as already being monstrous, and the substitution of "little girl" for "piggy", as used in the earlier film, seems more like sublimated violence taken out on a defenseless other rather than retaliation. This sense of eeriness is further consolidated as he turns off his bedroom light and searches the courtyard with his telescope, looking into other tenants' windows, seeing both the mundane and the sexual. Looking into the window of a couple across from him he sees the man initiating sex with the woman and one of her breasts is exposed. As Owen greedily looks on, the woman suddenly looks up and "sees" him watching her. Further, this use of the "inhuman" eye to look at his neighbours makes him as predatory as the vampire.<sup>10</sup> Here too the telescopic eye is shown as equivalent to that of Abby: the light coming back through the lens makes Owen's eye shine bright yellow, exactly as Abby's do when she loses control and, quite literally, becomes the vampire. Interestingly, it is just after this that Owen sees the new neighbours arriving, one of whom is Abby, the vampire.<sup>11</sup> As Owen gets sexually excited, the undead child is made manifest, almost as if produced from his own psyche. As I have noted elsewhere, such emotional extremes then configure: "the vampire as being an outward manifestation of the adolescent boys' pent up frustrations and/or sublimated sexuality; the monstrosity of his burgeoning manhood that he cannot contain and so projects it outside of himself into the outside world." (Bacon, *People are Strange* 7)

The importance of this "connection" with the woman across from Owen will become apparent later but it establishes the more overtly sexual nature of the relationship between Owen and Abby. Abby is far more obviously sexually demarcated as female - Eli had a deep voice, but here, Chloe Moretz as the vampire, is obviously a girl with longer hair, full lips and a fairer voice. The story too emphasises this heightened sexualisation through the repeated use of the Romeo and Juliet story - though a brief reference, it is made in the book and the first film mainly when Eli leaves Oskar a note saying "I must go and live, or stay and die."<sup>12</sup> In Reeves' film, however, we see Owen's school showing the play during a class and subsequently him owning a copy of the book. The motif of illicit love beyond parental control is further exemplified in their respective "parents." Owen's mother is largely oblivious other than calling him in from the courtyard during one of his and Abby's trysts, but the vampire's "father" is much more aware of what's happening. Lindqvist's book explicitly posits this relationship as pedophilic; here it is constructed on similar but significantly different lines. As the film progresses, we learn that Abby has known "father" since he was a child; in fact we see a set of photo-booth pictures that show him the same age as Owen is now. Theirs was also a love story but he grew old, whilst Abby remained young. In a touching moment, as he realises he is no longer of use to her, the 50-year-old man says to the 12-year-old girl: "please don't see that boy again ... Okay?" Abby does not answer and he knows his time is up.<sup>13</sup> The mirroring of these two characters was shown earlier in the film when Owen spots "father" leaving the block of flats, and the two characters lock eyes, almost realising even then that each

will replace the other - the past seeing its future and vice versa. If Owen is to replace Abby's "father," then she will have to replace his mother, which does happen in *Let the Right One In*, too. In the first film, though, the vampire does not so much replace Oskar's mother but they decide together to leave the world of adults and their interference.

In *Let Me In* the situation is slightly different. Owen's mother, as mentioned earlier, is an absent figure, as was Oskar's before, but she is not the most significant woman in the young boy's life before the vampire appears. What we do see though is that Abby replaces Owen's first "sexual" partner. This is the woman across the courtyard that Owen has been voyeuristically spying on. The moment that they "saw" each other joins them in the same way that a vampire and its victim are connected, and so for Owen to be with Abby she must be removed. This happens after Owen and Abby have met in the basement of their building. Owen cuts his hand so that they can bond in blood, and the sight of blood drives Abby into a frenzy. Rather than attack Owen she runs from the building. Unfortunately, the woman that Owen has been spying on is passing just at that moment, and Abby attacks her biting deeply into her throat. This, quite literally, eliminates the female competition, allowing Abby to assume her role, a point later highlighted when we see her washing blood of herself in the shower in Owen's flat.<sup>14</sup> This scene, which in the earlier film establishes Eli as not being gendered, shows Abby to be a girl.<sup>1</sup> We do not see her body but rather blood swirling around her feet, echoing scenes from films such as *Carrie* (1976) by Brian De Palma, where this signifies a girl's coming of age and sexual maturity. Now that Abby has gotten rid of the competition she has become the "woman" in Owen's life.

Consequently, here the children are not innocents running away from adult categorisation but are knowing and manipulative; not controlled by society but in need of controlling. As noted by James and Jenks, these are the immoral children born of sin from another age:

[that] children can and do commit acts of violence voic[s] the possibility that, after all, the Puritans were correct; that children are born sinful and have a natural propensity for evil unless properly and rigorously restrained. This doctrine of Adamic 'original sin' is a model of childhood, elsewhere formulated as the 'Dionysian' by Jenks (1995a) as an image of the wilful and unconstrained potential, which has always provided the dark side or inarticulate backdrop of our contemporary and dominant images of the child.<sup>15</sup> (James and Jenks 321)

In this construction, Owen and Abby are innately "bad"; their otherness is not so much that of someone who is eventually excluded from society but that of a body that was never included. This can briefly be summarised as the difference between the amoral and the immoral child in that Oskar and Eli in the Swedish film act instinctively but in a strangely unknowing way - their innocence is that of the eternal child which as Robson describes is; "more likely to see childhood as the locus of innocence... which effectively transformed the Garden of Eden from a place to a stage of life" (Robson 23); whereas Owen and Abby were almost born to be bad. In being seen to be born of sin they are almost adults in children's bodies. This is an apt metaphor for the vampire child as it is almost inevitably constructed as an adult

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<sup>1</sup> In *Let the Right One In*, Eli is shown with a horizontal scar where his/her genitals should be.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1981, Christopher Frayling, *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, London: Faber and

trapped in a child's body. As Louis notes in Anne Rice's novel about Claudia, the doll-like undead infant: "she was the most beautiful child I'd ever seen, and now she glowed with the cold fire of a vampire. Her eyes were a woman's eyes." (Rice 104) Consequently, the vampire child's immorality is not because of what it does but because it confuses the boundaries between adult and child. This is shown most clearly at the end of each film. As noted above, Oskar and Eli are contained in a dream-like bubble, an eternal Neverland from which they have no desire to escape; but Owen and Abby are on a very different train as they leave the story. We see a ticket inspector walking through a busy train checking tickets. The light here is cold and bright; this is a real train going to a real destination. Owen and Abby are not escaping from the world but escaping into it.

### **Conclusion: The Right One or the Wrong One?**

"I'm the fucking analyst, not you! It's none of your business!"

"Why do you persist in thinking that I am somehow manipulating you?" Timmy said sweetly... "We are both at the mercy of the unconscious aren't we? You and I, dead and undead, shadow and self. Yes. Are we each other's shadow, perhaps? Or is it even more complex?"

(Somtow, *Vampire Junction* 120)

Juxtaposing cinematic and sociological critique is an inherently risky endeavor, and yet the seeming applicability of tools from one discipline to the other is tantalizingly apposite. Particularly where one - cinema - is in many respects a mirror create by and of the same social constructs and systems that designate the categories explored in the other. As such, one should always be aware that cinema about childhood is produced by adults, in the same way that sociology is theorised by a group necessarily excluded from the category they are examining, i.e., childhood. With limitations firmly in mind, it is still adjusting one's viewpoint to see what other aspects of a well known-object became apparent when looked at from a different, if slightly skewed perspective.

The undead child in *Let the Right One In* and *Let Me In* highlights the age old question of what we are and what exactly the vampire itself is. Ernest Jones in his psychoanalytic study of nightmares observes: "they can only represent ideas projected on to [it] from the minds of the living." (Jones 99) Others, such as Twitchell, Frayling and Showalter amongst others, see the vampire as a typically sexual manifestation "at the borders of masculinity, femininity and bisexuality"<sup>2</sup> (Showalter 179), thus portraying the vampire as the projection of repressed desires exploding into everyday life. However, they miss an important point that is only more evident in that of the vampire child, and that is temporality. The vampire as an adult, though living through time, has never changed categories; adults are allowed to be monsters and transgressive beings. In contrast, social construction of what actually constitutes a child and how that is represented on film continually changes through time, even in the stages within the category itself. John Modell comments about chronicity in youth as being: "the most important single cue for a series of transitions that mark the departure from a prior status or relationship to a major social

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<sup>2</sup> James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1981, Christopher Frayling, *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

institution and the entry into a subsequent status or relationship." (Modell 13). Eli and Abby are locked in a latent position between states. At eternally twelve they are never going to be teenagers, never mind adults; seemingly their only choice is to forever repeat themselves.

However, the children in Alfredson's and Reeve's films are too at a transitional point - a boundary state between what is expected of them and what they themselves want. The two movies and the novel configure this through their respective acts of dissent which consequently balance them of the edge of potential change. As Margarida Morgado comments:

The sense of threat that accompanies criminal and undisciplined or untutored children, their disappearance as 'children' and their re-emergence as monsters or victims of a ruthless society is counterbalanced by the nostalgia for a lost category of the innocent, pure, passive, and dependent child. (Morgado 251)

In being shown as "monsters," which is also shown in their relationship with the vampire, both threatens and disrupts the form of childhood that they are expected to fulfill. Interestingly, this does not mean that in breaking the mold of adult expectation they are then allowed one type of "not-child" to perform, as the conclusions to each film show. Oscar and Eli are compelled by circumstance to behave badly. There is no sense of intrigue, manipulation or sexual impropriety in their relationship. As Anne Billson notes:

Its a classic happy ending in that we leave them at what is probably the optimum point in their story: young and in love with each other, and free. each has saved the other's life, they trust each other completely and from now on they can be together. We're not supposed to think too hard about the trail of corpses they leave behind them." (Billson 111)

Their Rousseau-ian innocence is one that they share. Even over 200 years of being a vampire has not changed that in Eli, and you can believe that of Oskar as well. Their escape from the world of adults on the train is in fact one into themselves; they are not children, they are innocents - a subtle if important difference from what adults expect from them.

Owen and Abby are different as their otherness is because they are already too old for what they are; they actions show them to be adults within children's bodies. While Oskar and Eli remain locked in time, Owen and Abby are made of temporal disruptions, being shown as both young and old, child and adult as seen in their relationship with each other and their attitude to adults. This temporal and expectational dissonance is caused by the disparity between what society thinks they should be and what they actually are. This situation is noted by Morgado in terms of societal expectations and child agency: "The rival claims that adults do not want to leave behind the irresponsibility of childhood and that children know too much are two contradictory tendencies that necessarily transform generational bonding and conflict." (Morgado 259) Owen and Abby's departure at the end of the film is then not so much one from Los Alamos but from adult expectation, straight to a place where they are no longer externally categorised but can be themselves. If one equates Los Alamos with adult society, a line that Owen says to Abby earlier in the film makes new and unexpected sense: "But why would you come here? Nobody *moves* here. I hate it here. Someday I'm gonna get out and I'll never come back. the people here...they're ... they're just stupid."

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Hoyles, *Changing Childhood*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1979, 16, Print.

<sup>2</sup> One can also argue the case for Danny Glick from Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* (1975) to receive this honour but Claudia is far more of a central character to the continuing narrative of Rice's novel.

<sup>3</sup> John Ajvide Lindqvist was born in 1966, Tomas Alfredson in 1965 and Matt Reeves in 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Somewhat curiously both Moodyson and Banke were also born in the 1960s, 1966 and 1969 respectively.

<sup>5</sup> A similar device is used in the teen vamp films of the 1980s, such as *Fright Night* by Tom Holland (1985), *The Lost Boys* by Joel Schumacher (1987) and *Near Dark* by Kathryn Bigelow (1987), where it is only when the male teenager has become emotionally or sexually frustrated that the vampire then suddenly appears.

<sup>6</sup> This same line but with a different age, 17, is spoken by Edward Cullen in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*.

<sup>7</sup> There is a suggestion that this nobleman, turned vampire, is in fact Gilles de Rais, a 15<sup>th</sup> century aristocrat and serial killer.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Blackeberg was built with no churches at all; whilst Los Alamos boasts the largest amount of churches per head in mainland USA. See Audio Commentary with Director. *Let Me In*, 2011 (DVD)

<sup>9</sup> On listening to the director's commentary we discover this is a mask taken of the character playing "The Father" who kills the victims for Abby to drink their blood. See Audio Commentary with Director. *Let Me In*, 2011 (DVD)

<sup>10</sup> A similar motif is used in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* from 1954 and also *Fright Night* by Tom Holland from 1985. *Fright Night* in particular shows the connection between the adolescent boy, Charley Brewster, and the vampire because they "see" each other through the "inhuman" eyes of the teenager's binoculars.

<sup>11</sup> This copies a scene from *Fright Night*, where at the height of the teenage boy's sexual frustration the vampire appears.

<sup>12</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3, Scene 5.

<sup>13</sup> This story line curiously correlates to more adult vampire films where the immortal undead also find new partners. *The Hunger* from the book by Whitely Strieber (1981) and the film by Tony Scott (1983) in particular shows this when the vampire, Miriam Blakelock, has lived since the times of ancient Egypt, and has chosen many partners through the centuries, each of whom she has "loved." However, as intimated in *Let the Right One In* and *Let Me In*, these partners inevitably age and die, leaving the vampire once more alone.

<sup>14</sup> This is not represented as an immediate consequence of attacking the woman but a later scene where Abby enters Owen's flat without being invited in and begins to bleed from her eyes, nose and ears.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Jenks, "Decoding Childhood," in P. Atkinson, S. Delamont and B. Davies (eds) *Discourse and Reproduction: Essays in Honour of Basil Bernstein*, New York: Hampton Press, 1995, Print.

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