# THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF MONSTROUS CHILDREN

## Essays on Anomalous Children from 1595 to the Present Day

Edited by
Simon Bacon and Leo Ruickbie

Anthem Press
An imprint of Wimbledon Publishing Company
*www.anthempress.com*

This edition first published in UK and USA 2020
by ANTHEM PRESS
75–76 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA, UK
or PO Box 9779, London SW19 7ZG, UK
and
244 Madison Ave #116, New York, NY 10016, USA

© 2020 Simon Bacon and Leo Ruickbie editorial matter and selection;
individual chapters © individual contributors

The moral right of the authors has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise),
without the prior written permission of both the copyright
owner and the above publisher of this book.

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020940783

ISBN-13: 978-1-78527-520-3 (Hbk)
ISBN-10: 1-78527-520-8 (Hbk)

This title is also available as an e-book.

# CONTENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *List of Illustrations* | | vii |
| *Acknowledgements* | | ix |
| | Introduction<br>*Simon Bacon and Leo Ruickbie* | 1 |
| **Part I** | **Historical Case Studies** | |
| Chapter One | The Possession of John Starkie<br>*Joyce Froome* | 23 |
| Chapter Two | The Naughty Little Children: The Paranormal and Teenagers<br>*Renaud Evrard* | 39 |
| Chapter Three | I Was a Real Teenage Werewolf: The Seventeenth-Century Witchcraft Trial of Jean Grenier<br>*Leo Ruickbie* | 53 |
| Chapter Four | Deviance on Display: The Feral and the Monstrous Child<br>*Gerd H. Hövelmann* | 71 |
| **Part II** | **Factual Anxiety in Fictional Representations: The Undead Child** | |
| Chapter Five | Imprints: Forming and Tracing the Malevolent Ghost-Child<br>*Jen Baker* | 91 |
| Chapter Six | Undead Role Models: Why the Zombie Child Is Irresistible<br>*Anthony Adams* | 109 |
| Chapter Seven | Children for Ever! Monsters of Eternal Youth and the Reification of Childhood<br>*Simon Bacon* | 121 |

**Part III** **Factual Anxiety in Fictional Representations: The Monstrous Child**

Chapter Eight 'Not a child. Not old. Not a boy. Not a girl': Representing Childhood in *Let the Right One In* 137
*Allison Moore*

Chapter Nine Perverted Postmodern Pinocchios: Cannibalistic Vegetal-Children as Ecoterrorist Agents of the Maternal Imagination 151
*Anna Kérchy*

Chapter Ten From the Monster to the Evil Sinthomosexual Child: Category Mixing, Temporality and Projection in Horror Movies 165
*Marc Démont*

**Part IV** **Cultural Categorization in the Past, Present and Possible Future**

Chapter Eleven Evil Twins: Changing Perceptions of Twin Children and Witchcraft among Yoruba-Speaking People 179
*Nicholaj de Mattos Frisvold*

Chapter Twelve Doli Incapax: Examining the Social, Psychological, Biological and Legal Implications of Age-Related Assumptions of Criminal Responsibility 193
*Jacquelyn Bent and Theresa Porter*

Chapter Thirteen Black-Eyed Kids and the Child Archetype 205
*Brigid Burke*

Chapter Fourteen Indigo Children: Unexpected Consequences of a Process of Pathologization 217
*Gerhard Mayer and Anita Brutler*

*Notes on Contributors* 235

*Index* 239

non-mimetic' offspring.[4] However, the contemporary layman never doubted the veracity of these monstrosities, and opinions differed only insofar as these great curiosities would be fit to be presented to the Royal Society, or rather a veil should be drawn over them as imperfections in human nature, signs of the culpability of the community, harbingers of natural catastrophes or of God's wrath.[5]

Monstrous births were attributed to the malleability of unpredictably 'leaky' female bodies equally endangered by external forces and 'visibly deformed from within' by their own unruly fantasies. The astonishingly vulnerable maternal corporeality – endowed with an inherent capacity to problematize the boundaries of self-same and other – simultaneously represents the 'best hopes and worst fears of societies faced with an intuitive sense of their own instabilities'.[6] From early modern scientific tracts to contemporary postmodern popular cultural products, monstrous maternal imagination remains related to anxieties concerning human creativity and procreativity, issues of reproduction as well as of insatiable hunger and consumption.

This study examines a rare case and a most peculiar form of infantile anatomical anomalies: I shall focus on cannibalistic and/or self-consuming 'vegetal children', in particular their representations in twenty-first century cinematic recyclings of the theory of monstrous maternal imagination. The ambiguous figure of the frightening, fascinating plant baby resonates with the myth of the mysterious mandrake plant root, the mandragora or the nightshade invested with a special significance in occult lore for various reasons. Besides its anaesthetic, narcotic and hallucinogenic effects applicable for medical and magical purposes, according to folk wisdom – and the Bible calling it a 'love plant' – the mandragora provides protection, fertility and prosperity as a remedy to help barren women conceive a child and a phallic charm curing male sterility (Figure 9.1).

It occupies an interstitial 'point on earth where the vegetable and animal kingdoms meet', but its anthropomorphic shape also makes it akin to the alchemical homunculus it can be turned into with the adequate ritualistic practices – buried in a human grave and watered for 30 nights with milk in which three bats have been drowned.[7] The mandrake root, believed to grow by gallows from the sperm of hanged men, is a humanoid plant that embodies anxieties and fantasies related to sexuality, in/fertility and degenerate rebirth from death – as illustrated by the recent fantasy film *Pan's Labyrinth* in which a little girl attempts to cure her pregnant mother by placing a mandragora baby she raises under her marital bed.[8]

Legend says that when the mandrake root is dug up, it screams to kill all who hear it. The vegetal children I analyse here also communicate a message in a provocative manner. They disclose that the 'monstrous is intrinsically opposed to the familiar course of nature as an affront to the expected, and thus throws doubt on life's ability to teach us order'.[9] Yet it may reveal disorder at the core of order to eventually teach us 'to think differently about difference'.[10]

This message is much in line with a recently emerging research field, critical plant studies' insistence on the vital role of vegetal life in rethinking the past, present and future of human subjectivity and survival. As Michael Marder argued in his *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*[11] plants' unique material knowledge, freedom and temporality – which resist the logic of totalization and exclusion – may bring human thought 'back to its roots' and perform a deconstruction of human metaphysics by undoing binary

**Figure 9.1** Picture of a man collecting a mandrake root with the help of a dog in *Tacuinum sanitatis in medicina*, manuscript, 1390. Codex Vindobonensis Series nova 2644 Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek fol 40 recto. Public domain.

oppositions such as self and other, body and soul, life and death, surface and depth, or the one and the many. Dawn Keetley and Rita Kurtz's *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*[12] suggests that plants' 'implacability and impersonality, their rooted un-freedom, their unintentionality, and their prolific and non-teleological "wild" growth' have rendered them monstrous in numerous cultural narratives; nevertheless their vegetal threat to the boundaries of humanity might ultimately provide educative critique to abuses emerging on environmental, ethical and identity-political planes. The following filmic analyses provide fictional illustrations of these theoretical arguments.

## 2. Timothy Green: The Altruistically Self-Consuming Plant Child

*The Odd Life of Timothy Green*, directed by Peter Hedges,[13] tells the story of an impossibly perfect child born under grim circumstances worthy of a horror movie. After a childless couple learns about the medical decision concerning the termination of their unsuccessful fertility treatments, they perform a private mourning ritual: they write an inventory of the ideal features of the infant they could never have, and say farewell to their dreams by burying the paper slips in a wooden box in their backyard. After a night thunderstorm that affects only their land a magical boy child crawls out of the muddy soil, sprouted up from dirt and their desires, creeps into their bedroom and with his strange ways changes the life of his chosen foster parents for good. However, the dream child's earthly stay is ephemeral; risen from a grave, he must also fall back there. Despite his cuteness and tenderness bordering on the saccharine he bears the characteristics of a living dead creature precisely because of his magical qualities incompatible with humanness: it is his vegetal being that makes him seem otherworldly, vulnerable and tragically, touchingly 'withering'.

Timothy has tiny tree leaves sprouting from his ankles which he loses one by one each time he fulfils one of the qualities his adoptive parents wished for – hence condemning himself to slow decay. As he proves to be honest, optimistic, funny and resilient his simple altruistic acts of kindness manage to contact and console isolated fellow human beings: he makes an uncle laugh on his deathbed, befriends a girl with an ugly birthmark, draws a realistic portrait of a boss flattered by all and teaches his family to gain confidence in their parenting skills and to accept life's imperfections, including passing. With all his leaves fallen he disappears and presumably leaves a better world behind.

The movie's story and script were written by the same Peter Hedges who authored cult comedy-drama *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*[14] that deals with a similar topic, tackling the difficulties of raising a child with a developmental disability who, despite being regarded as a 'little horror' by the able-ist society marginalizing him, eventually succeeds in having a positive impact on his surroundings, which is forced to reconsider its standards of normality and normativity. *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* deals with serious social problems – infertility, adoption, physical alterity labelled disadvantageous disability, and environmental pollution – in more of a magical realist, even fairy-tale-like tone, worthy of its producer, the Walt Disney Company.

The vegetal child with a penchant for photosynthesis and self-consuming altruism lives in perfect symbiosis with nature and humanity, a union that has been lost to contemporary society. In a post-human era, he is more humane than humans. In this respect he reminds us of another 'little horror' fantasy figure, Spielberg's gentle herbatologist extraterrestrial E.T., conceived by the director as a genderless 'plant-like creature' consistently shot from the eye-level of a child as a double of protagonist Elliot – the scenes where Timothy is riding by the basket of his girlfriend's bicycle can be regarded as explicit tributes to the visual iconography of E.T.[15] The physical marks of Timothy's otherness are minimal – his leaves can be easily covered with socks – and his radical difference is due to the hyper-empathy, sacrificial tenderness and the moral values projected on him.

Timothy verges on a stock character type that exists only to provide the protagonist and the spectators an important life lesson while being deprived of a discernible inner life of his own as well as of the possibility of character development. Much like the 'manic pixie dream girl' whose sole role is 'to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures'[16] or the 'magical negro' meant to provide unrestrained spiritual, mystical aid to the white hero, the 'amazing aberrant child' taking here the form of a monstrous vegetal dream boy exists only to help adults to learn to appreciate all the sensations offered by the natural world, and life in general along with death that eventually gives meaning to life. Since such characters do not pursue their own happiness, and merely seek to assist others' journey to self-fulfilment, they never grow up, their unselfishness coincides with the lack of a solid, mature self and they stand for static, regressive vegetation instead of dynamic progress. (There is a certain melancholic touch to this *puer aeternus* figure, much in the vein of another boy child living in a perfect yet tragic harmony with nature, J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan, symbolizing cheerfulness alone of his kind on the remote Neverland.) Despite being a title character, Timothy is more of a plot device helping others in their maturation.

Timothy's coming-of-age story remains incomplete. He is gone young, so in the memory of his family he stays an eternal child and a harbinger of death, a melancholic memento mori. He embodies the television trope of the 'child too good for this world', an underage Christ figure familiar from Victorian fiction, akin to the kind-hearted orphans from Dickens's novels whose self-sacrificial acts provide spiritual cleansing to sentimental readers by satisfying their compassion craze. The film's lush autumn imagery sets the story in the season of passing to remind us that the polysemic word 'fall' shares an etymological root with the word 'cadaver' both indicating 'decline, decay' (see Old English *feallan*, Latin *cadere*). Since Timothy as a flesh-and-blood plant boy is oxymoronic, his sacrifice is necessarily fantasticated, highly aestheticized and sanitized from tragic into bittersweet.

In line with the Hollywood movie scenario of an obligatory happy ending, autumn is immediately followed by spring instead of winter: shortly after Timothy leaves them, the Greens fail to grieve but rather gladly welcome in their house a little girl who is to become their foster child, tellingly named Lily. In fact, according to the filmic frame narrative, Timothy's story, presented in flashback, merely serves to convince the adoption counsellor of their ardent desire to have a child. Thus, the plant child gifts them with a tale that helps them acquire a real child. Since the movie's overall project is to sustain old-time values, this substitution of one child by another is not so much the metaphor of consumerism – acquiring new in place of old – but rather of recycling – changing the old into new.

*The Odd Life of Timothy Green* indeed holds ecocritical implications. The private trauma of the couple's infertility is reflected on a public level by the economic crisis inflicting the local community's declining pencil-making industry and on a macrocosmic scale by the barrenness of the land we learn about from the drought-warning poster featured among the first shots of the film. The lack of procreative potentials is compensated for by the gift of creativity, the fecundity of fantasy: Timothy's marvellous-monstrous birth from garden dirt and parental dreams is already a representation of the recycling process

whereby waste material is turned useful, put into new use without the elimination of its essential qualities. The Greens' imaginings make the wind change and bring rain, hope and regeneration. As their name suggests, they are environmentalists seeking to improve the health of their natural environment, incorporating the concerns of non-human elements. Inspired by their plant child, they invent a new technology to make pencils from fallen leaves and thus save from closing the town's pencil factory, the lone business guaranteeing the livelihood of local citizens. The pencil certainly symbolizes the capacity to write a new story, too. If the time together with Timothy affirms the Greens' nurturing skills[17] besides their capacity to raise a child, they are also confirmed in their ability to caringly relate to their organic environment and narrate this mutually enriching relationality in an educative tale of their biophilia. The film can be interpreted as an illustration of the 'biophilia hypothesis' arguing for human being's instinctive bond and urge to affiliate with other living systems.[18] While storytelling provides a compensatory means to ward off the fear and frustration caused by the human awareness of mortality as a common destiny of all forms of life, the contact with the natural, plant, world also brings consolation through reminding its audience of the possibly symbiotic union of everything alive and the promise of rebirth implied in decay and death – as demonstrated by the cyclicality of seasons. As autumn is followed by spring, the passing of Timothy – the name also means an Eurasian grass naturalized in North America[19] – is followed by the arrival of a new child – whose name Lily refers to the flowering of the land and the blooming of new hope – as well as by the revival of the pencil factory, and the affirmation of the Greens' empowered self-identity as greens.

Timothy Green is literally a good-natured child and hence a highly idealized embodiment of Nature pictured as benign, sacrificial and resilient, able to survive the abuses of an undeserving humanity it subserviently nurtures. The film's ecocritical implications bordering on wishful thinking deal with the iconic image of gentle Mother Earth. The tagline of the movie, 'He's a force of nature', equates the title-character's vulnerability with force to reinforce his connection with monstrous maternal imagination on two planes. On the one hand, as a plant child he springs from the very 'flesh' of Earth Mother whose qualities he overidentifies with by embracing a relentless caretaking conventionally coded as maternal. On the other hand, he is the product of a human mother who can transform weakness into strength by sublimating the trauma of her infertility into creative imagination that eventually manages to bring to life an organic child whose main goal will be to support others with his docile ways.

The title character's ecocritical message is encapsulated in the ambiguous implications of his name. 'Timothy' denotes the infinite grass field that arouses awe, fantasies of fertility, of liberation and engulfment, and hence symbolizes the Great Mother archetype in the collective unconscious described by Jungian psychology as a figure revered for its positive side – solicitude, wisdom, growth – and feared for its negative side – the world of the dead, darkness, seduction, secrets – both aspects commonly associated with Nature we equally dread and admire. The final component of the name signifies God (*theos*), whereas the first comes from the verb 'to honour', also used as a legal term that means to estimate the amount of punishment due to criminals (*time*). This reflects the double bind of human beings to our earthly existence both burdened and blessed by

the awareness of mortality. Timothy, the monstrous vegetal boy, embodies 'Little Father Time'. Biologically a child but spiritually an old carrier of ancient wisdom about the vulnerable way of all mortal flesh, he also reveals beneath our child-loving a dark sense of necrophilia that uncannily holds the promise of regenerative recycling as well.

## 3. Little Otík: The Nightmarish Plant Child Devouring Its Cannibalistic Parents

If Timothy Green is the sentimentally ideal embodiment of the marvellous 'monstrous plant child', 'a literal dream come true',[20] Little Otík is a nightmarish, worst conceivable version of the same fantasy of a child created from parental wishes. Czech surrealists Jan Švankmajer and Eva Švankmajerová's *Little Otík*[21] is a live-action grotesque horror movie featuring stop-motion and puppet animation about a childless couple who dig up a tree stump to clean it, trim it and nurture it as a real baby – changing its nappies, powdering its bottom, cutting its nails, singing it lullabies and so on – until their vegetal offspring develops an insatiable appetite and devours everybody in sight, consuming his mother's hair, the family cat, the postman and even a social worker. Locked away in the basement by his father wanting to prevent tragedy, Little Otík is taken care of by a little girl, Alžbětka, who feeds him an old paedophile harassing her and then accidentally his own loving foster parents. The root baby meets his end when, disregarding his child friend's warnings, he turns against the plant world he originated from and gorges himself on the cabbage patch of the neighbour lady who serves justice by killing him, splitting his guts with a garden hoe.

The film's alternative English title, *Greedy Guts*, tellingly associates with the story childish voraciousness and unruly appetites. However, the 'bottomless hunger' does not only belong to the monstrous plant infant but also to the infertile couple tormented by their all-consuming yearning for a child, a dangerous, obsessive desire of an 'auto-cannibalistic nature' that holds the 'potentially horrific consequences of wish-fulfilment' thematized by the film.[22] *Little Otík*, a tale of 'a tree-root brought to life by maternal desire and paternal woodwork',[23] offers a sinister reading of the myth of monstrous maternal imagination, while paying homage to those classics of 'maternal', 'reproductive' or 'fertility' horror – including Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*,[24] David Lynch's *Eraserhead*[25] or David Cronenberg's *The Brood* – which portray babies as 'little horrors' who are just as much ruthless consumers fatally engulfing parental lives deprived of freedoms as objects of consumption inescapably distorted by passive-aggressive expectations disguised as parental loving.[26]

Although the film can also be interpreted as a black humorous rendering of Pinocchio's metamorphosis from wooden puppet into real boy, it is even more explicitly based on the grim Czech fairy tale *Otesánek*, 'The Wooden Child', by Karel Jaromír Erben. In this source text, an elderly couple's wish is granted as a long-awaited child is born from a log of wood sung to life with a lullaby, yet the creature wreaks havoc, feeding on neighbours and destroying its family. In the end, when the parents are freed from the belly of their monstrous wooden son – ripped open by the matriarchal hoe, as in Švankmajer and Švankmajerová's film adaptation – they never wish for a child again. As Sue Short points

out, this ending implies a 'rare admission of the hardships of parenthood' and suggests that childlessness, or rather with the contemporary politically correct term 'childfreeness', contrary to folk wisdom or consensual social standards, might eventually be 'a blessing' instead of a curse.[27]

Hence infantile consumption and the hunger for maternal nurturing signal the dysfunctionality, disintegration and decay of the traditional nuclear family. *Little Otík*'s advertising material built on the warning 'Be careful what you wish for' is much in line with another popular piece of the emerging genre of children's Gothic, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* adapted to the screen by Henry Selick[28] where a family member's desperate attempts at amending a dysfunctional family turn awry, make matters worse and result in the horrific dehumanization of a beloved – in Coraline's case a monstrous mother, in Otík's a monstrous son – just like in many a specimen of the cautionary fairy tale tradition both texts draw on.

The disturbing latent adult content of presumably innocent children's literature like fairy tales is illustrated by the preteen Alžbětka reading a medical textbook entitled *Sexual Dysfunction and Sterility* hidden under the dust jacket of Erben's fairy stories. Alžbětka acts as a sort of a detective figure who cleverly notices similarities between the real-life events next door and the classic tale of Otesánek she is reading. A precocious, knowing child, fully conscious of and ready to direct the horrific happenings more than any adult characters around her, she embodies a double of Little Otík, a mindless infant with the base instinctual urge of hunger preceding and preventing any human intellectual activity. The child with an animalistic lack of thoughts and the child with an excessive superfluence of thoughts are equally qualified monstrous.

The media shift representing Little Otík's cannibalism in two-dimensional cartoon animation holds various exciting implications. First, it might refer to the necessary 'fantastification of the traumatic real' described by philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a phenomenon when in times of terror one is faced with the ultimate horror, the Unimaginable Impossible itself – such as a meaningless act of terrorism, or an innocent infant ruthlessly murdering its parents – it is so inappropriate to be integrated into our experience of reality that it must necessarily become fictionalized as traumatic 'reality trans-functionalized through fantasy'.[29] On the other hand, these horrific scenes might be interpreted as the projections of the aggressive fantasies of a child frustrated by parental discipline disguised as nurturing. As the iconography of many fairy tales attest, symbolically speaking parents cannibalistically devour children by socialization, silencing them and controlling their appetites. With a grotesque twist, here, the eaten turns against the eater, while the child takes revenge on the parent. *Little Otík* offers a monstrous subversion of 'the food trope in children's literature that traditionally teaches children how to be human through the imperative to eat "good" food in a 'proper' controlled manner'.[30] No wonder, Alžbětka overidentifies with Little Otík.

Ironically, the film's finale seems to suggest that all children must either mature or perish. Alžbětka transforms into a little mother figure who feeds, protects and sheds tears for the monstrous baby Otík when its original foster mother gives up on it. Still the plant child cannot win over the human adults whom it can engorge only temporarily before being consumed by them, like the babies in surrealist scenes of the movie who are

trapped in watermelon or are caught in a net and 'wrapped up in newspaper like carp for a Christmas meal'.[31]

The act of cannibalistic devouring can be symbolically associated with the threat represented by any totalitarian regime that puts all individuals on the verge of becoming faceless meat. Instead of escapism too often associated with the fantasy genre, surrealist dream imagery has frequently been put in the service of militant critical investigations of reality touching upon inevitable yet insupportable sociopolitical issues such as ideological engulfment, a perverse hunger degrading humanity. Since the Švankmajers started to work on the story of Otesánek back in the 1970s, their adaptation of *Little Otík* can easily be related to a major leitmotif of the oeuvre: a satirical commentary on repressive technologies of truth-production and ideological incorporation practiced by Stalinist communism and bourgeois realism alike (which the artists had to suffer from throughout long decades of their career) and a subversive project to challenge the resulting tyranny of reason that has delimited genuinely kaleidoscopic, fantasmatic representations of reality.

However, the story might also comment upon contemporary obsessive-compulsive needs driving global culture. According to Anikó Imre, Little Otík, a cautionary tale of consumption and an allegory of obsessive eating and cannibalism, meditates on the 'global crisis in appetite' characterizing the specific historical conditions of post-communist Central Eastern European society's late capitalist consumer cultural greed gone out of control.[32] The film is an 'agit scare'[33] piece that makes a political argument in fictional terms about a 'civilization [that] eats everything. It eats nature, whole cultures, but also love, liberty and poetry and it changes these into the odious excrement of the society of consumption and mass culture'.[34]

Moreover, Švankmajer regards the Walt Disney Company and the art it designs specifically for child consumers 'one of the leading destroyers of European culture' insofar as it strategically 'tames children's soul', deprives underage audience of critical creative consciousness and aesthetic sensibility in order to raise new generations of 'idiotic' consumers of mass culture.[35] Considering the above, *Little Otík* may enter into dialogue with *Timothy Green* allowing the food – art – to take revenge on the cannibal – popular film industry – to prevent the emergence of new consumers who eat – interpret cultural products – because of mindless hunger instead of sophisticated good taste. As Zoe Gross convincingly points out, *Little Otík* thematizes monstrous ambivalence itself by blurring boundaries through building on a 'perpetual confusion or interchange between otherwise oppositional or divergent states', such as the horrific and the hilarious, the consumer and the consumed, subject and object, interior and exterior, food and eater, food and waste, food and body, animated and inert matter, infants and monsters, ingestion and pregnancy.[36] The confusion between the contradictory yet complementary acts of the rebellion against nature and the rebellion of nature could be added to this list.

In Švankmajer's view *Otesánek*'s 'drastic fairy tale' is 'a topical version of the Faust myth' tackling 'the tragic dimension of a rebellion against nature' that is doomed to fail yet still constitutes the token of human freedom. Otík's parents are overreaching characters who revolt against their biological destiny (infertility) and usurp the divine privilege of creation by making up a child of their own, who is not the product of a human fleshly intercourse but the result of the exploitation of the vegetal environment,

the digging up of a tree root from Mother Earth. The couple's very name refers to their passionate relationship with nature: Horák is a topographic name for 'people of the mountains' but it also denotes 'people of the heat'. Their passionate desire for a child takes perverse forms: Mrs Horák(ová) fakes pregnancy to deceive neighbours (while her imitation is reflected by Alžbětka's hiding a basketball under her shirt) and stubbornly pretends that a tree stump – that shares no likeness whatsoever with a human baby – is their child. In one of the most disturbing scenes the Virgin Mary–like mother breastfeeds the dirty, mutilated, dead root she mistakes for her infant son. Her ravishment is contrasted by the spectators' repulsion as the sacred meets the profane. This is a case of failed recycling bordering on a perverse recursivity: human's rebel against nature (invent an unnatural child) that rebels against them (naturally eating its inventors). The complexity of this dynamics and the tragicomical consequences of maternal imagination abusing nature are illustrated by Otík's end: his final meal is a cabbage patch he destroys as a site connected to the 'folkloric, infantile fantasy about baby-making which disavows natural sexual and biological activity'[37] and is chopped up by a postmenopausal grandmother figure who turns ravenous Otík into manure, an organic fertilizer for Mother Earth, and further food for thought for spectators hungry for intellectual pleasures.

## 4. Bioethical Dilemmas in Place of a Conclusion

In the case of early modern monstrous births, the infant's corporeal strangeness supposedly communicated to the mother a 'lesson' concerning her own dreads and desires spectacularly and undeniably imprinted onto the body of her offspring. Similarly, it is absolutely challenging to enquire about the collective anxieties surfacing in immediately contemporary cultural fantasies about 'little horrors' like Timothy Green or Little Otík brought to life by parental imagination. According to Rosi Braidotti, new reproductive technologies and today's test-tube babies signal 'the long-term triumph of the alchemist's dream of dominating nature through masturbatory practices of self-insemination'.[38] Although the two films analysed here might mark a final chapter in the long history of the fantasy of self-generation, their triumphant message is tinted with self-ironic doubt, too. Timothy, the ideal child, embodies the positive features his parents desired but lends a tragicomic twist to them: for example, he scores the winning goal but helps the other team to victory because he accidentally kicks the football into the net of his own team. Otík's filial love takes extreme measures peaking in cannibalism and self-annihilation. These grotesque fictional episodes are indeed charged with real social dilemmas: the photosynthesizing relatives are meant to test the limits of human empathy with different life forms and point towards serious bioethical debates which prevail in the era of compulsory prenatal care and concern parental and medical rights to decide who is worth living (and who is rather recommended to be aborted).[39] The modern medicalization of bodies has resulted in the perfectibility of living organisms and the gradual abolition of physical anomalies. Yet this 'denial of the sense of wonder'[40] in our scientifically measurable, lived realities does not deprive us of the fascination felt for the mysteries of nature, a need for the amazement by the fantastic diversity of being that is fulfilled by popular cultural imaginings about monstrous vegetal children and their kin.

**Notes**

1 This chapter was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
2 Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels* (*Des monstres et prodiges*), trans. Janis L. Pallister (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1573] 2011).
3 David Cressy, *Agnes Bowker's Cat: Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 76–92.
4 Sharon L. Snyder, 'Maternal Imagination'. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 15 December 2013, viewed 2 February 2015, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1953800/maternal-imagination.
5 See *Mist's Weekly Journal*, 19 November 1726; Rictor Norton, 'Monstrous Births', *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: An Online Sourcebook*, 1 January 2006, viewed 2 February 2015, http://rictornorton.co.uk/grubstreet/rabbit.htm.
6 Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002), 30.
7 Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages: An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, [1928] 2011), 250; and Paul Christian, *The History and Practice of Magic* (New York: Citadel, 1963), 403.
8 *Pan's Labyrinth*, dir. Guillermo Del Toro (Madrid: Estudios Picasso, 2006), DVD.
9 Georges Canguilhem, 'Monstrosity and the Monstrous', *Diogenes* 40 (1964): 27.
10 Rosi Braidotti, 'Mothers, Monsters, and Machines', in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conroy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 78.
11 Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
12 Dawn Keetley and Rita Kurtz, eds, *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/58083.
13 *The Odd Life of Timothy Green*, dir. Peter Hedges (California: Walt Disney Pictures, 2012), DVD.
14 *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* dir. Lasse Haltström (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1994), DVD.
15 *E.T.*, dir. Steven Spielberg (California: Universal Pictures, 1982), DVD.
16 Nathan Rabin, 'The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown', *A.V. Club*, 25 January 2007, viewed 1 April 2015, http://www.avclub.com/article/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-emeli-15577.
17 Sue Short, *Fairy Tales and Film: Old Tales with a New Spin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13.
18 Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
19 Timothy R. Spira, *Wildflowers and Plant Communities of the Southern Appalachian Mountains and Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
20 Short, *Fairy Tales and Film*, 13.
21 *Little Otík. Greedy Guts*, dir. Jan Švankmajer and Eva Švankmajerová (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2000), DVD.
22 Zoe Gross, 'Little Otík', *Senses of Cinema* 71, June 2014, viewed 1 April 2015, http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/cteq/little-otík/.
23 Anikó Imre, *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 208.
24 *Rosemary's Baby*, dir. Roman Polanski (California: William Castle Productions, 1968), DVD.
25 *Eraserhead*, dir. David Lynch (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1977), DVD.
26 *The Brood*, dir. David Cronenberg (Montreal: CFDC, 1979), DVD.
27 Short, *Fairy Tales and Film*, 13.
28 *Coraline*, dir. Henry Selick (California: Focus Features, 2009), DVD.
29 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 18–20.

30 Carolyn Daniel, *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
31 Peter Hames, 'Bringing Up Baby: Jan Švankmajer Interviewed about *Otesánek* (*Little Otík*)', *Sight & Sound* 11 (2001): 26.
32 Imre, *Identity Games*, 200.
33 Paul Wells, 'Animated Anxiety: Jan Švankmajer, Surrealism and the "Agit-Scare"', *Kinoeye*, 21 October 2002, viewed 1 April 2015, http://www.kinoeye.org/02/16/wells16.php.
34 Švankmajer in Imre, *Identity Games*, 208.
35 Hames, 'Bringing Up Baby', 28.
36 Gross, 'Little Otík', 3.
37 Ibid., 7.
38 Braidotti, 'Mothers, Monsters, and Machines', 88–89.
39 Maya Sabatello, *Children's Bioethics: The International Biopolitical Discourse on Harmful Traditional Practices and the Right of the Child to Cultural Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 208.
40 Braidotti, 'Mothers, Monsters, and Machines', 89.

## Bibliography


Braidotti, Rosi. 'Mothers, Monsters, and Machines'. In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, edited by Katie Conroy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury, 59–79. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Canguilhem, Georges. 'Monstrosity and the Monstrous'. *Diogenes* 40 (1964): 27–43.

Christian, Paul. *The History and Practice of Magic*. New York: Citadel, 1963.

Cressy, David. *Agnes Bowker's Cat: Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Daniel, Carolyn. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children's Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Gross, Zoe. 'Little Otík'. *Senses of Cinema*, iss. 71, June 2014. http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/cteq/little-Otík/ (viewed 1 April 2015).

Hall, Manly P. *The Secret Teachings of All Ages: An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy*. Los Angeles: Philosophical Research Society, [1928] 2011.

Hames, Peter. 'Bringing Up Baby: Jan Švankmajer Interviewed about *Otesánek* (*Little Otík*, 2000)'. *Sight & Sound* 11 (2001): 26–28.

———, ed. *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Švankmajer*. London: Wallflower, 2008.

Imre, Anikó. *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Massachussets Institute of Technology, 2009.

Keetley, Dawn, and Rita Kurtz, eds. *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Marder, Michael. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

Norton, Rictor. 'Monstrous Births'. *Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper Reports: A Sourcebook*, 1 January 2006. http://rictornorton.co.uk/grubstreet/rabbit.htm (viewed 1 April 2015).

Paré, Ambroise. *On Monsters and Marvels* (*Des monstres et prodiges*). Translated by Janis L. Pallister. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Rabin, Nathan. 'The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown'. *A.V. Club*, 25 January 2007. http://www.avclub.com/article/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-emeli-15577 (viewed 1 April 2015).

Sabatello, Maya. *Children's Bioethics: The International Biopolitical Discourse on Harmful Traditional Practices and the Right of the Child to Cultural Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. London: Sage, 2002.

Short, Sue. *Fairy Tales and Film: Old Tales with a New Spin*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Snyder, Sharon L. 'Maternal Imagination'. *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Updated 15 December 2013. http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1953800/maternal-imagination (viewed 1 April 2015).

Spira, Timothy P. *Wildflowers and Plant Communities of the Southern Appalachian Mountains and Piedmont*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

Wells, Paul. 'Animated Anxiety: Jan Švankmajer, Surrealism and the "Agit-Scare"'. *Kinoeye*, 21 October 2002. http://www.kinoeye.org/02/16/wells16.php (viewed 1 April 2015).

Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. London: Verso, 2002.

## Filmography

*The Brood*. Directed by David Cronenberg. Montreal: CFDC, 1979, DVD.

*Coraline*. Directed by Henry Selick. California: Focus Features, 2009, DVD.

*Eraserhead*. Directed by David Lynch. Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1977, DVD.

*E.T.* Directed by Steven Spielberg. California: Universal Pictures, 1982, DVD.

*Little Otík* (a.k.a. *Greedy Guts*). Directed by Jan Švankmajer and Eva Švankmajerová. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2000, DVD.

*The Odd Life of Timothy Green*. Directed by Peter Hedges. California: Walt Disney Pictures, 2012, DVD.

*Pan's Labyrinth*. Directed by Guillermo Del Toro. Madrid: Estudios Picasso, 2006, DVD.

*Rosemary's Baby*. Directed by Roman Polanski. California: William Castle Productions, 1968, DVD.

*What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* Directed by Lasse Haltström. Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1994, DVD.