

Terrifying Children in Postwar Italian Horror Cinema

A Historical-Educational Perspective

Irene Papa

Research Fellow, University of Turin

e-mail: irene.papa@unito.it

Starting with some reflections on the cultural significance of monstrosity and the uncanny, this essay sets out to explore some figures of monstrous childhood in postwar Italian horror cinema. The films mentioned will be *Kill Baby... Kill!* (Mario Bava, 1966), *Toby Dammit* (Federico Fellini, 1968) and *Un gioco per Eveline* (Marcello Avallone, 1971).

Keywords: childhood, cinema, history, uncanny, adulthood.

Bambini terrificanti nel cinema horror italiano del secondo dopoguerra. Una prospettiva storico-educativa

A partire da alcune riflessioni intorno al significato culturale della mostruosità e del perturbante, il presente saggio si propone di esplorare alcune figure di infanzia mostruosa nel cinema horror italiano del secondo dopoguerra. I film menzionati saranno *Kill Baby... Kill!* (Mario Bava, 1966), *Toby Dammit* (Federico Fellini, 1968) e *Un gioco per Eveline* (Marcello Avallone, 1971).

Parole-chiave: infanzia, cinema, storia, perturbante, adultità.

The monstrous childhood in Horror Cinema

Childhood can be considered representative of a liminal space, a reality in transition that refers to the idea of the ‘threshold’ – from the Latin *limen -minis* – and thus to a temporality full of expectations and suspensions that unfolds in the horizon of a goal: the responsible adulthood. In this framework, then, childhood would be configured as a realm of indeterminacy and incompleteness. Immersed in its constitutive silence – the term *infancy* derives from the Latin *in-fari* (= who cannot speak) – childhood offers itself to the word of others, and has often taken on the features – also and above all in the history of educational ideas – of a ‘hidden figure’ despite past attempts to give it back its word (Becchi, 1982, p. 12). As Becchi argued, discourses about childhood, even the most creative ones, have to do with “ideological positions that also make use of collective attitudes and practices, institutionalised or not” (*ivi*, p. 6, my trans).

On the discursive dimension, therefore, children often become latent figures: in the past they have been the object of “social silence” on the historical-pedagogical level (Cambi, Ulivieri, 1994). On an experiential level, childhood is an ambiguous figure as *presence-absence*: while being an integral part of society, it is nevertheless a reality fully dependent on the adult world, in existential, conceptual, and normative terms. In a certain sense, as Bacon and Ruickbie state, children are “haunted by the adults they will become” (2020) or, in educational terms, by the adults they *should* become. On the other hand, popular culture seems to refer us to an opposite reality: that of adults haunted by evil, out-of-control, disturbing, abnormal and, in a word, *monstrous* children.

Today, the evil child has become a stable element of our collective imagination. In fact, if the naughty child has been and still is a fundamental figure in children’s literature, given its pedagogical function as an *exemplum* (Giachery, 2023), it has been especially horror films that have exhibited it in all its violent perversion before an adult audience. Monstrous children on horror screens are doubly disquieting insofar as they allude to a *revolted* and a *revolting* childhood.

In the first sense, revolted childhood has to do with the alteration of its ambivalence of *presence-absence* through the typical violence of the image, that is the outcome of a deforming force “that takes hold of forms and carries them away in a *pres-ence*” (Nancy, 2003/2005, p. 22), the latter being a

“presence as subject” (*ivi*, p. 21). According to Nancy, the violence of the image consists precisely in a force that transforms absence into full presence:

The image is the imitation of a thing only in the sense in which imitation *emulates* the thing: that is, it rivals the thing, and this rivalry implies not so much reproduction as competition, [...] competition for presence. The image disputes the presence of the thing. [...] In the image, or as image, and only in this way, the thing—whether it is an inert thing or a person – is posited as subject. *The thing presents itself* (*ibidem*).

Thus, the image in itself would be the sign of a violence that has taken place; a violence that exceeds the system into which it bursts in order to assert itself as a “shattering intrusion” (*ivi*, p. 16), bearer of “another form, if not another meaning” (*ibidem*). And so, childhood imposes itself in all its deformed presence. However, the horror film narrative goes beyond the inherent and constitutive violence of the image. Conceived and produced for the most part with the aim of engendering fear and anguish in the spectator, horror films place us before the *abject*, or what Kristeva defined as a seductive revolt of meaning that pertains to what is conventionally excluded or repressed: “a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant” (1941/1982, p. 2). According to Kristeva, the abject belongs to the realm of the obscene and unthinkable, and that is why, she writes, “abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (*ibidem*). In this framework, then, as an object of cultural suppression, the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order” (*ivi*, p. 4). Death itself – the object of perpetual repression – is as abject as it can be: “the corpse, seen without God and outside science, is the utmost of abjection” (*ibidem*).

As spectacle and image of abjection, the violence of horror cinema imposes monstrosity on us as a presence, and in the monstrous children it has found some excellent exemplars. So, the revolted childhood becomes revolting.

According to the contemporary monster theory, the “monsterization” of certain subjects corresponds to a cultural process that has nothing to do with chance: since time immemorial, the monster has performed a certain social function and, in some ways, one might add, in an educational sense. Traces of this function can be discerned in the very etymology of the word *monster*, which derives from the Latin *monstrum* and refers to two verbs in particular:

on one hand, to the verb *monstrare*, which, as Benveniste stated, “means not so much ‘to show’ an object as ‘to teach a way of behaving, to prescribe the way to be followed’ as a preceptor does” (1969/2016, p. 519), and on the other hand to the verb *monere*, which means “to warn” and alludes to a prodigious sign sent by the gods. In both cases, *monstrum* refers to an instruction given by an authority, be that the preceptor’s or the divine, but it is only the latter that is extraordinary in character. However, as Weinstock states, monsters “are messages that come from human beings rather than from the gods” (2020, p. 26) and, in a Foucauldian perspective, the label of monstrosity is to be understood as “part of a normative regime that disciplines human beings to act and think in particular ways” (*ibidem*). Monsters, thus, are social constructs that reflect specific anxieties and desires, and their horrific character derives from their intimate connection with the abject: they escape the order of things. As Cohen has written: “the monster is “*a form suspended between forms*” and, as such, is dangerous insofar as it “threatens to smash distinctions” (2020, p. 40). The monster, therefore, *alters* the appearances of the world we are most familiar with. That is why monstrosity belongs to the realm of the Freudian *unheimlich* or “uncanny” which sees rising to the surface that which, until a short time before, in the reassuringly familiar world – the *heimlich* – was hidden, concealed. Here then, what is commonly known is revealed as impenetrable and opaque through the return of what was once repressed. In Freud’s own words, “the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix ‘*un*’ [‘un-’] is the sign of repression” (Freud, 1919/2020, p. 77). The uncanny is a disquieting perceptual experience, and as such it is also potentially fruitful: it does not adhere to reality as we are used to knowing it, which is why it opens up new interpretative possibilities, summoning us into a process of self-discovery (Madrussan, 2021). Moreover, as Beal suggests, it is possible to extend the idea of *heimlich* – homely – to the collective dimension as well:

this *heimlich* feeling of security and “at-homeness” [...] may refer to one’s confidence in the meaning, integrity, and well-being of one’s society or culture. [...] Taken in this very broad way, the *unheimlich* is that which invades one’s sense of personal, social, or cosmic order and security—the feeling of being at home in oneself, one’s society, and one’s world. The *unheimlich* is the other within, that which is “there” in the house but cannot be comprehended by it or integrated into it (2020, p. 297).

Within this framework, then, monsters – the very embodiment of chaos – are what “make one feel *not at home at home*” (ivi, p. 298), that is a rather revealing discomfort which may be a process of self-discovery also on a collective level and from a historical perspective.

As a “*form suspended between forms*” (Cohen, 2020, p. 40), childhood is a ‘potential monster’, and its relation to the uncanny can be deduced, at a first level, if we consider it as a liminal time and space studded with those repressions that occur in the process of social integration. However, as Balanzategui states, the uncanny child is a “deeply paradoxical cultural otherness” (2018, p. 13) involving “multiple temporal vectors” (*ibidem*).

In fact, on one hand, the child is mostly considered a non-adult: in this case, childhood takes on the meaning and reality of a radical difference from the adult world. Childhood, however, also recalls a subjective past: the child is also what the adult *has been* and, consequently, what the adult has repressed: “Thus, the child is simultaneously opposed to, the past of, and a *part of*, the adult” (*ibidem*).

Moreover, childhood is also an otherness for which adult society is responsible in terms of care and guidance. It is a dynamic that involves the exercise of power on several levels: not only in the family dimension and the parent-child relationship, but also in the state-child relationship, where it is not only children who are governed, but also the adults who are in relationship with them. From this point of view, “child-rearing norms provide a standard by which the conduct of parents can be evaluated and regulated – by themselves and by others” (Smith, 2016, p. 3). It goes without saying that “the more the category of the child is defined and controlled, the more strongly it represents cultural anxieties, however contradictory they might be” (Bacon, Ruickbie, 2020, p. 6).

Beyond the aspects that may lead us to think in general of childhood as an uncanny otherness and a reality and a time stage linked to a potential monstrosity, it must be borne in mind that “monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (Cohen, 2020, p. 39).

In this regard, it seems appropriate to specify that the narratives around terrifying childhood have a relatively recent history that can be traced back to the 1950s, when cinema soon joined the various short stories that made it a protagonist (Renner, 2016). The first film to portray a monstrous image of childhood was *The Bad Seed* (1956, Mervyn LeRoy), adapted from

William March's namesake novel published in 1954, but "the golden age" of monstrous childhood began with *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) by Roman Polanski – adapted from Ira Levin's novel of the same name published the year before – and *The Exorcist* (1973) by William Friedkin – adapted from William Peter Blatty's novel published in 1971 (Hutchings, 2018).

In the same years, Italian horror cinema also offered some representations of monstrous childhood. This contribution aims at exploring these early examples by trying to keep in mind the following questions: Where does monstrous childhood originate from? What relevance may it have to the historical contingency to which it belongs?

Melissa Graps and the cycle of violence

The birth date of Italian horror cinema is generally considered 1957, the year in which Riccardo Freda's film *I vampiri* (*Lust of the Vampire*) was released. A first ten-year phase of Italian horror production was inaugurated: the Gothic phase. Thus, horror films produced between the late 1950s and the late 1960s show some elements in common.

On the one hand, they draw some elements from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Gothic literary tradition, such as the setting – in a distant past, such as the nineteenth or early twentieth century –; the locations of the story – ancient buildings such as old castles with crypts and secret passages, villages, or forests –; the presence of supernatural entities – like vampires and spirits who have risen from the grave; – and the high stereotyping of the characters. On the other hand, these elements make up an imagery that was totally foreign to the Italian traditions and folklore of the time, and yet these horror films "reveal a profound link with contemporaneity" (Di Chiara, 2009, p. 14) as they hint at phenomena that were underway in Italian society at the time of the economic boom. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the recurring interweaving of horror and eroticism, as well as by the insistence on female vampirism, indicating an important change in customs concerning both the role and image of women and sexual behaviours in the new Italian consumer society. That eroticism is a recurring element in the spectacle of abjection is quite understandable if one thinks of a "culture in which sex and sin were considered one and the same" (Bini, 2011, p. 61). This characteristic constitutes just one example of how Italian Gothic horror cinema "can be

defined as a ‘creative reworking’ of the Gothic Staples” (Curti, 2015, p. 5).

In the Italian cinema of these years, director Mario Bava “became the undisputed master of the Gothic horror genre throughout the 1960s” (Bini, 2011, p. 56), and it is he who offered us one of the first – if not the very first – depictions of a terrifying and monstrous childhood in the film *Kill, Baby... Kill!* (*Operazione paura*, 1966).

The movie opens with the arrival of Dr Eswai in a remote village in the countryside, where he must perform an autopsy on the body of a woman died under mysterious circumstances. Entering the local inn, he encounters some sombre-faced and, to say the least, unfriendly men and women. When the doctor introduces himself as a medical examiner, he immediately awakens the hostility of the locals: “It’s against the law of nature to touch the dead”, some villagers would admonish him, trying to prevent him from performing the autopsy. Shortly afterwards, Dr Eswai meets Inspector Kruger, who is trying to examine the case, but in vain: no one answers his questions, and the terror and the code of silence hinder the investigation. The autopsy reveals no meaningful details about the woman’s death. The only oddity the doctor finds in the woman’s body is a coin in her heart: a ritual practised by Ruth, the local witch, aimed at preventing the spirit of the dead from coming back to life. It is the innkeeper’s young daughter who unwittingly reveals to Dr Eswai that the woman’s passing is linked to Villa Graps, a sumptuous, abandoned building dominating the village. Following the revelation, the young woman is soon haunted by the ghost of a little girl – Melissa – dressed in white and with long blonde hair, who returns among the living to induce those who evoke her memory to commit violent suicide. The rituals performed by Ruth will be to no avail: the young woman will commit suicide, and soon there will be other victims.

The figure of the ghost-child is terrifying: in the first part of the movie, she is only a hinted presence. In fact, we are only allowed to glimpse certain parts of her body – her slender legs with white stockings and black shoes on her little feet, her white dress dangling from a swinging seesaw in the middle of the cemetery, her small hand, tender and menacing, leaned against the window pane – or to see certain signs announcing her presence, such as the bouncing white ball that often precedes her or the smug, cheerful laugh in the face of the terror looming over the village. From the second part of the film onwards, we can observe her impassive face with her blue eyes, fixed and barred. The child is then entirely revealed when she appears to Dr Eswai, who

personally goes to the Villa to ask Baroness Graps – and Melissa’s mother – few questions. Here, the little girl appears in the corridors, preceded by her white bouncing ball, then suddenly she disappears and reappears as a doll sitting among other creepy dolls, some of which are beheaded. As Bacon states, the ghost-child “signals an end, a full stop in the narrative of normalized society” (2020, p. 123), and in Bava’s film, this applies first and foremost from a visual point of view in relation to the way space is represented. As Curti has commented, in fact:

with *Kill, Baby... Kill!* Bava works on the concept of non- Euclidean space. Besides, such space is no longer modelled on the hero/ heroine’s subjectivity, thus reflecting his or her fears and anxieties [...]. Here the diegetic space is modelled on (and, more importantly, by) Melissa’s ghost, who has the power to change and reorganize physical space to her liking, as shown by her appearances throughout the film, thus causing in the other characters (and the viewer as well) a sense of displacement (2015, p. 164).

It is Melissa, therefore, who leads the game of fear, and her figure is revealed as the events lead to the explanation of the mystery. While we learn during the film that Melissa was a child who died at the age of seven, it will be her mother, Baroness Graps, who will clarify the circumstances of her death:

The village gets what it deserves. They let my little girl die twenty years ago. One of them ran over with a horse. *The village was celebrating, everybody was drunk. She begged for help for a long time desperately...but nobody would help her.* In my opinion they should be all condemned.

In this way, we discover that Melissa is a victim of the neglect and indifference of adult society, whose collective guilt is punished by the child inducing the living to suicide. However, shortly afterwards we discover that the ghost-child is not really endowed with a will of her own: she acts through the hatred and resentment nurtured by her mother, a *medium* who uses her daughter’s spirit to take revenge on the community. What concerns the ghost-child in general seems also valid for the restless and evanescent Melissa Graps:

while it is permanently removed from interacting with the continuation of the ideological order which produced it, *it refuses to disappear* [...]. There is almost a sense of the excess that created it in the

first place – often *the violence of the adult society* around it, producing a singularity of malignance that tries to consume all that it encounters. Further, *the ghost's insubstantiality points to a strong sense of something hidden or repressed trying to make itself apparent – a truth or hatred revealed*. These two ideas particularly link the ghost to the those that see them for *it is that repressed hostility or secrets of the people or society that manifest the spectral child in the first place* (Bacon, 2020, p. 123).

Would the uncanny figure of Melissa Graps – actually played by a young boy, Valerio Valeri – therefore be a good example of the return of the repressed at a collective level? Such is the hypothesis put forward here, especially when considering the conditions experienced by many Italian children in those same years. Well-known educationalists such as Lamberto Borghi and Dina Bertoni Jovine widely denounced the exploitation and buying and selling of child labour in the countryside and in the cities, a phenomenon that also constituted an obstacle to the fulfilment of the compulsory schooling called for by the 1948 Italian Constitution. Moreover, the testimonies of children collected and published in 1957 by journalist Dina Rinaldi in the volume entitled *Il Vallone del Purgatorio* are particularly touching: here, exhaustion from the shepherds' intense work and experiences of isolation are juxtaposed with expressions of bitterness and resentment against the general conditions of exploitation and social injustice¹.

As Curti has commented, *Kill, Baby... kill* can be considered “a rereading of Gothic themes through Italy's folklore” (2015, p. 165). And indeed, superstition – evoked in the movie on several occasions – is embodied by the character of Ruth, a witch busy preparing potions and *fatture*, a figure reminiscent of the magical life of the South, with its *maciari* and the close relationship between Catholicism and paganism², visually rendered in the film through the alternation of numerous crosses here and there and the resorting to amulets and magic rituals. So, this folkloric picture is much closer to reality than one might think, and vaguely so may be the monstrous childhood depicted there. Has the film showed the return of a ‘social’ repressed?

¹ This is a recurring theme in both the pedagogical studies and the cinema of those years. For a more extensive illustration, see Papa (2022).

² For an in-depth study of the relationship between Southern Catholicism and magic, and the role of magical practices as cultural responses to the ‘crisis of presence’ and the subjugating feeling of “being acted upon” by malignant forces, see Ernesto De Martino (1959/2015).

The devilish little girl

After having portrayed a ruthlessly cynical and indifferent Rome, full of wonders and miseries, such as the one depicted in the film *La dolce vita* (1960), Federico Fellini confronts us with a sombre warning: “Hey, come and see the *monster!*”, a girl shouts on the beach in the film’s final sequence. In fact, the fishermen caught an enormous, frightening fish, perhaps representing “the announcement of an incomprehensible future, but also the presence or the imminence of an indecipherable evil” (Fofi, 2020, pp. 27-28, my trans).

Shortly afterwards, Marcello, dazed after a night of drinking and partying, catches a glimpse of the blonde teenager he had met some time before as a waitress in a restaurant: “the little angel from an Umbrian church”.

Well: from afar she appeals to him and invites him to go for a walk, but Marcello is unable to catch her words, and soon their paths separate irretrievably. Thus, Marcello’s prospects of salvation vanish definitively. In the same film, musician and intellectual Steiner, Marcello’s friend, decides to commit suicide after killing his children, for whom he cannot imagine a better world. The future seems to reserve no room for innocence or salvation, as revealed by how infants and adolescence are portrayed in the movie.

Eight years later, Fellini reprised some situations from *La dolce vita* in a 40-minute episode that constituted the third part of a collective horror film: *Histoires Extraordinaires* (*Spirits of the Dead, Tre passi nel delirio*, 1968), inspired by the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Fellini’s segment, entitled *Toby Dammit*, is inspired by Poe’s *Never Bet the Devil Your Head*, published in 1841. In Fellini’s adaptation, Toby Dammit is an English actor who comes to Rome to shoot the first Catholic Western movie in exchange for the latest model of a Ferrari.

The pale and worn actor is greeted by an infernal Rome with a blazing sky, full of gloomy promises, and soon encounters a series of grotesque, excessive, menacing, and caricatured characters: the human fauna that populates Fiumicino airport; Padre Spagna, the film’s producer; the staff at work in the TV studio where he will be interviewed; and the vacuous and mechanical stars of the entertainment world. The excesses of *La dolce vita* are here taken to the extremes: the characters no longer embody human beings; they are rather disturbing masks that parade chaotically before Toby’s dreamy eyes. Intolerant and sickened, in the throes of a desperate nightmare, Toby Dammit drowns his frustration in alcohol, and even uses drugs, especially

“when I want to return to normal”, as he puts it. We soon discover that the actor is haunted by his personal demon: a little blonde girl dressed in white and holding a white ball, a figure almost identical to Melissa Graps, except for her red nail varnish, lip gloss and a malicious smile. During the TV interview, Toby states that he does not believe in God at all. Yet, he believes in the Devil: “*to me the devil is cheerful, agile. He looks like a little girl*”. The little girl only appears three times in the film, and her last appearance leads the protagonist to a mad suicide, another element that seems reminiscent of Bava’s film. Drunk and fleeing from the star-studded awards ceremony, in a feverish race in his Ferrari, Toby comes to a halt at the sight of a bridge interrupted by a sinkhole due to the structure’s collapse. On the other end of the bridge is the smiling figure of the ‘devil’. It is then that Toby cannot resist and, back in the car, takes a running start to throw himself into the void. The film ends with his severed head in the hands of the smug little girl.

The character of the blonde teenager is probably a complex intertextual figure on which several interpretative hypotheses can be formulated. As argued by Trentin, the film’s chaotic representation of space is quite meaningful: “while *La dolce vita* was based on the potential of interpreting a crumbling reality, *Toby Dammit* is characterized by the loss of a signifying syntax: reality here has already crumbled” (2016, p. 228). In an “already crumbled” reality, the little blonde girl seems the antithesis of the “Umbrian angel” whom Marcello had let go in *La dolce vita*, and her iconographic depiction, together with the seduction she exerts in the direction of self-destruction, recalls certain characteristics of Melissa Graps, who, moreover, was linked to the theme of guilt, victim as she was of the collective violence of adult society. Is it possible that the despair and the sense of self-destruction nurtured by Toby Dammit is linked to his guilt by having been a full participant in a vicious and vacuous system, in which he now feels suffocated and from which he wishes to escape through death?

As we have seen, the “demonisation” of the alleged “new Melissa” takes place through the exaltation of details linked to female seduction, such as nail polish and lip gloss. In this “already crumbled” reality, the disfigured angel recalls a little *Lolita*, a famous and controversial character from Nabokov’s novel published in 1955 and later adapted for the screen by Stanley Kubrick in 1962. A mischievous and seductive girl – at least from the point of view of the novel’s narrator –, *Lolita* is a symbol of a childhood that has lost its innocence. *Lolita* is a monster because she is a sexualized child. In this respect:

if the idea that children are different from adults is fundamental to the modern period, then the regulation of sexuality and sexual knowledge has become increasingly important to the work of making that distinction – so much so, in fact, that the child who ‘knows’ sex can become the very symbol of a childhood lost (Lebeau, 2008, p. 108).

There are, however, specific circumstances that over time have fuelled fears about this kind of “monstrous childhood” that transcends the boundaries of sexual knowledge: “the eroticized commodification of the image through the visual media: photography, cinema and, now, virtual technologies of the image”³ (*ivi*, p. 110).

After World War II the irruption of the *American Way of Life* in Italy generated several contradictions, especially in relation to the female figure, whether young or adult. On the one hand, the traditional mentality was looking upon women as exemplary, sober, and discreet future “wives and mothers”. On the other hand, the products of the culture industry – such as magazines aimed at a female audience – were promising to enhance the seductive potential of women by proposing a *femme fatale* model. Thus, it is not surprising that the main monstrous figure in Italian horror films is the woman. In fact, “the Devil, in Italian Gothic Horror, was a woman” (Curti, 2015, p. 6), while men “are deceived, betrayed, ridiculed, humiliated, tortured, murdered – all at the mercy of the fairer sex” (*ibidem*).

In the case of *Toby Dammit*, the devil is a young girl with a seductive and an almost “adult” face, maybe suggesting the outcome of a process of corruption, perhaps closely related to the cynical game of false appearances of the world of show business and the new changing society.

Toby, who is a part of that world but also eager to distance himself from it, is fully subjugated by it. As Porcari has commented: “Toby is treated as if he were a child throughout the film because despite Toby’s associations with drinking, speed and abandon he is essentially a passive character” (2007, p. 11), and nothing can do to resist the call of the devilish little girl. Perhaps because of a vague sense of guilt – especially if one accepts the intertextuality with Mario Bava –, perhaps because she is the embodiment of a world in

³ Another “monstrous” example of the commodification and sexualisation of childhood was Shirley Temple. In this regard, see the pages written by Surace (2022) in relation to this “child prodigy” and her face portrayed in Salvador Dalí’s *The Youngest, Most Sacred Monster of the Cinema in Her Time* (or *Barcelona Sphinx*, 1939).

which there is no longer any room for innocence: the angels have now irrevocably mutated into their opposite.

The dissolving childhood between reality and representation

Whether due to a collective neglect of children or an alleged process of corruption linked to the commodification and the spectacularization of sexuality, in the two cases analysed, the monstrous childhood would seem to depend on adult society. Both the child-ghost and the devilish little girl drive the adult to suicide and, therefore, it is perhaps possible to say that in these cases the monsters take on the full meaning of a *pedagogically exemplary warning*, aimed, however, at adults. In this regard, Renner's observation is quite apt:

the history of evil child narratives has largely been a series of efforts to confirm the essential innocence of children. [...] Surprisingly, evil child narratives are an essentially humanistic genre that proposes that evil has a source and therefore a solution (2016, pp. 7-8).

Given the highly controversial nature of the themes represented, it is perhaps possible to say that the horror or surreal setting – the timeless past, the nightmare, or the dream – constitutes a perfect space to conduct a ruthless social and pedagogical critique between the lines. And it is precisely in a psychological horror film with a surrealist matrix that we again find a very similar figure to Melissa Graps, namely in the film *Un gioco per Eveline* (Marcello Avallone, 1971). In this case, however, it is the adults who suppress the little blonde girl dressed in white playing with her white ball, in a complex discursive plot concerning parenting. Two married couples are in crisis precisely in relation to the theme. In the first couple, Pierre wants to have a child, since “children are part of marriage”, but Natalie wants to love him without being a mother and provocatively asks: “What are children for? If not to make the grown-ups play a little?”. In the second couple, Minou is despairing over the death of her daughter Eveline and cannot accept it. At stake is her very identity: she does not conceive herself as a woman without being a mother. She believes Eveline is still alive and that it was her husband, Philippe, who hid her from her, because he was not her biological father

and because “He was jealous. He envied Eveline because she was mine, only mine”. Moreover, she can still see and hear her daughter, and Pierre too. Finally, Philippe declares that he never wanted children, and that he had himself sterilised for this very reason.

It is a bourgeois drama that testifies to the crisis in the values of traditional marriage, amid lies and betrayals. Once Eveline’s death has been ascertained, and once Pierre has restored Minou’s maternity by having sexual intercourse with her – and betraying Natalie – it is he who shoots the child-ghost, thus putting an end to the tormenting dilemma. Only to discover later that, perhaps, it was all a dream. This, then, is another case of *dissolving childhood*. In this movie, however, childhood has the consistency of a questioned idea, desirable or not, in the parental design.

From a historical perspective, the representations of the three children observed here seem to be in close dialogue with the educational reality of their time. Melissa Graps seems to allude to a childhood that is a victim of the adult society in which it lives, dead before the eyes of an indifferent community. In this case, she is the repressed that returns in the guise of a ghost-child to torment the living and induce them to self-destruction. Melissa died “while the village was celebrating, everyone was drunk”. Here, the *monstrum* could allude to a warning to the adults, especially in an Italy that, although exhilarated by the “myth of well-being”, witnesses the exploitation of childhood as a rather widespread phenomenon. Toby Dammit is also driven to self-destruction by the apparitions of his personal demon: a young girl with a mischievous and seductive look, symbol of a corrupted childhood and a lost innocence, especially in close contact with the cynical world of show business and its models. One might think that, in both Bava and Fellini, the warning has to do precisely with the care adults take of the younger generations and their formative possibilities. The penalty being the collapse of the adult world as well. Finally, Eveline’s ghost signals, in its monstrosity, the decisive change in the values revolving around the family and its members (Cavallera, 2006). Completely rejected – as an idea and as a family project – by Natalie and Philippe – who in fact do not perceive her presence in any way – Eveline constitutes to all intents and purposes a repressed for Minou and Pierre, who fully project their own identities in their intention to become parents. Beyond the historical testimony that the film offers us, it also seems to pose a provocative question: what does it mean, for an adult, to be a parent?

References

- Bacon S., Ruickbie L. 2020. Introduction. In Bacon S., Ruickbie L. (Eds), *The Cultural Construction of Monstrous Children. Essays on Anomalous Children from 1595 to the Present Day*. London-New York: Anthem Press.
- Bacon S. 2020. Children for Ever! Monsters of Eternal Youth and the Reification of Childhood. In Bacon S., Ruickbie L. (Eds), *The Cultural Construction of Monstrous Children. Essays on Anomalous Children from 1595 to the Present Day*. London-New York: Anthem Press.
- Balanzategui J. 2018. *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema. Ghosts of Futurity at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Beal T. 2020. Introduction to Religion and Its Monsters. In Weinstock J. A. (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader*. Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press. 295-302.
- Becchi E. 1982. Retorica d'infanzia. *Aut Aut*. 191-192. 3-26.
- Benveniste É. 1969. *Le vocabulaire des institutions Indo-Européennes*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit (En. tr. by Elizabeth Palmer, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*. Chicago: Hau Books, 2016).
- Bini A. 2011. Horror Cinema. The Emancipation of Women and Urban Anxiety. In Brizio-Skov F. (Ed). *Popular Italian Cinema: Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*. London and NY: I.B. Tauris.
- Cambi F., Ulivieri S. (Eds.). 1994. *I silenzi dell'educazione*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia.
- Cavallera H. 2006. *Storia dell'idea di famiglia in Italia. Dall'avvento della Repubblica ai giorni nostri*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Cohen J.J. 2020. *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. In Weinstock J. A. (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader*. Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press. 38-56.
- Curti R. 2015. *Italian Gothic Horror Films. 1957-1969*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.
- De Martino E. 1959. *Sud e magia*. Milano: Feltrinelli (En. tr. by D. L. Zinn, *Magic. A Theory from the South*. Chicago: Hau Books, 2015).
- Freud S. 1919. *Das Unheimliche*. Imago 5(5-6): 297-324; (En. tr. *The uncanny*. In Weinstock J. A. (Ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader*. Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. 59-88).

- Giachery G. 2023. Childhood Noir: Pedagogical and Psychoanalytic Alternations in Children's Fairy Tale. *Encyclopaideia*. 27(65). 97-109.
- Fofi G. 2020. *Fellini anarchico*. Milano: Elèuthera.
- Hutchings P. 2018. *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema. Second Edition*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kristeva J. 1941. *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil (En. tr. by Leon S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horrors. An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- Lebeau V. 2008. *Childhood and Cinema*. London: Reaktion Book.
- Madrussan E. 2021. The Mood of Disquiet and Education. In Brinkmann M. et al. (Eds). *Emotion-Feeling-Mood. Phenomenological and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Wiesbaden: Springer. 151–167.
- Nancy J. L. 2003. *Au fond des images*. Paris : Éditions Galilée (En. tr. *The Ground of the Image*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
- Papa I. 2022. *Bad boys e allievi contesi. Realtà educativa e rappresentazione cinematografica nel ventennio postbellico, in Gran Bretagna e in Italia*. Como-Pavia: Ibis.
- Porcari G. 2007. Fellini's Forgotten Masterpiece: Toby Dammit. *CineAction*. 71. 9-13.
- Renner K. J. 2016. *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith K. 2016. *The Government of Childhood. Discourse, Power, Subjectivity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Surace B. 2022. *I volti dell'infanzia nelle culture audiovisive. Cinema, Immagini, Nuovi Media*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Trentin F. 2016. Rome, the dystopian city: Entropic aesthetics in Fellini's *Toby Dammit* and *Roma* and Pasolini's *Petrolio*. *Forum Italicum*. 50(1). 222–243. DOI: 10.1177/0014585816637070.
- Weinstock J. A. 2020. Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory. In Id. (Ed.). *The Monster Theory Reader*. Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press. 1-36.