

Dignity

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Inside:

Losing and Using Our Children

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From requests for childfree restaurants to a preference for childfree worship, it seems that American society has a strange relationship with the young. Innovative human relations experts recommend bowls of candy, nerf basketball, and company birthday parties so that employees can recreate with other adults during the ever-expanding workday. Thus enjoying their productivity, adults may avoid contact with the next generation, while perpetuating their own youth. A post-modern church "experience" offers some congregants a similarly comfortable setting. After dropping offspring at the well-appointed nursery, parents may enjoy the "show" of contemporary worship without interruption. Non-parents and parents alike may thus fully appreciate a baptism without unwanted noise from the baptized. Those with sufficient means may dine, fly, work, worship, and play without the cries and demands of dependent life. Adults may remain productive, preoccupied, focused and, in a dubious way, irresponsible.

A generation of adults in North America faces now the strange combination of purposeful neglect and systematic use. Complaints about ill-behaved, interrupting, unproductive children are gaining force at the same time that we propose the use of embryos, fetuses, and children for medical research. While a medical industry becomes increasingly interested in the usability of incipient life, a generation coming of age declares its perpetual youth and independence from dependent life. A new generation of grown-ups tends toward unapologetic neglect. I fear that we also are becoming predatory.

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While I was a doctoral student at Yale, a strange French film called *The City of Lost Children* became a cult classic among twenty-somethings. Yale students saw their own lives reflected in the plight of the abandoned and stolen children in the film. I suspect that the kind of privileged young adults who attend Yale should indeed see ourselves in the film, but not merely by identifying with the abandoned toddlers. In the surreal dystopia by Jeunet and Caro (1995), my own generation of privilege may gain important clues to our predicament, our vice, and what is required of us. For the villain who preys on children is, himself, a lost child, who justifies his vampirism by means of his own abandonment. And, by the end, we discover that the children only escape harm when the heroine of the film chooses to grow up.

The movie opens with a sequence that builds, slowly, toward terror. A young child watches, wide-eyed, from his crib as Santa Claus emerges from the chimney and then, carefully, pulls out and winds up a small toy. After smiling with delight at the toy, the child turns again toward the chimney and watches, with confusion and then fear, as another Santa squeezes out of the chimney, and another, and another, until the room is teeming with Santas, toys, and a distorted, defecating reindeer. The scene ends as the child grabs his plush bear and runs, crying desperately, for the door. His screams become the screams of a wizened, angry man as the scene shifts to a complex laboratory. We there discover that the crying child is connected to the screaming man, each one's skull

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hooked up to a metal clamp and system of wires. The man attempts in this way to extract the dreams of the child. But, it seems the child's dreams all morph into nightmares, leaving the child afraid and the man enraged. This two-part segment ends with the man whacking the plush bear against the contraption and then throwing the bear out to sea.

This menacing film consistently teeters right on the edge of infanticide. Moving out from the laboratory, we discover that it is surrounded by a larger setting of danger. While the angry old man (named Krank) quite literally abducts children, this is a place, which, in many ways, loses its young. We discover that all of the adults are either predatory or preoccupied in this ominous, dark city. Nocturnal cyclops track and capture toddlers to trade for technology and a pair of conjoined women command a band of pickpocket children whose names—like Newt and Miette (crumb)—indicate their vulnerability, all while sailors, dance girls, harried housewives and shopkeepers willfully keep about their own work and play. We also find the scientist who genetically engineered Krank ("a masterpiece genius with no soul") cowering below the sea, unwilling to go up and face the "dangerous" world he helped to construct. What Miette says of one stolen toddler sums up the fate of each child in this place: they are all "too little to bother." The film ends only as Miette herself risks growing up in order to save the other lost children.

Consider these "advances" in medical research with, as a sort of imaginative backdrop, Jeunet and Caro's negligent and predatory city: working diligently, scientists have discovered several "promising" uses for brain tissue extracted from aborted fetuses, as well as for the "totipotent" cells of human embryos leftover at fertility clinics. Both sources for medical advance are "too little to bother," save for the fact that they are worth our taking the time and effort to remove that which can cure disease. Some in the industry insist that such uses will not lead to abortion for money, and that we will never create embryos for the sole purpose of taking their stem cells. But we may find

"compelling" reasons to justify these changes in our current regulations. There is no reason why we will not redouble these efforts to eliminate dependence and suffering. Note also that some reputable scientists anticipate our using embryonic life to "cure" the aging process itself. Nascent life thus becomes the fount for perpetual youth.

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Some scientists are working toward the creation of human clones that could serve multiple medicinal purposes: as donors for ailing siblings, to alleviate the depression of grieving parents, to solve infertility predicaments unsolvable through presently available procedures. This goes on with apparent disregard that 1) in pursuit of the usable clone we will create many unviable clones who will suffer pain and then die or be put to death, and 2) that we will be creating incipient life simply for its use value. That many scientists are morally offended by this research is small consolation. Consider the reaction of researchers mere decades ago to the *in vitro* creation of human embryos. Many researchers and bioethicists now acknowledge that it is merely a matter of time before the procedure is perfected to become an accepted means for producing donors and replacements for lost children.

The pediatric pharmaceutical business is exploding, advancing by way of research on children who stand to gain no medical benefit. For a monetary reward and a nifty certificate of participation, children endure prolonged IV's, physical examinations, and MRI's. Bioethicists justify this violation of the Nuremberg Code with the claim that we are learning much to help children as a population. But critics now rightly charge that much in pedi-

atric research will benefit primarily the pharmaceutical companies who sponsor the protocols, producing "me too" drugs to expand a lucrative market of pediatric technologies for a growing number of newly diagnosable psychiatric disorders.

In their film, Jeunet and Caro create a setting worthy of Dickens' London, and the effect on adults who consider it should be similar. Exposing the precarious fate of children in his time, Dickens inspired one generation actually to come of age in order to care for and protect its children. If Dickens' generation had seen themselves only as poor little Oliver, they would not have enacted laws to prohibit the use of children to further the aims of industrialization. They realized rightly that they must identify with the adults in the novel.

The City of Lost Children is a cinematic dystopia for our own time, writing with bold brushstrokes the map of our own trajectory. While we assiduously avoid contact with and responsibility toward those who are "too little to bother," research scientists frighteningly insist that the littlest among us are in fact worth our attention, and our perilously vampiric use. Scientists are using nascent and vulnerable life in order that we might realize our dreams. Still thinking ourselves as victims and/or the rightful recipients of a technological utopia, we may champion the use of vulnerable life as a way to accomplish the safe life that our society encourages us to expect. But Krank's effort to steal from children their youthful dreams turns into a nightmare, and his nightmare may become our own. Contrary to the message of our therapeutic culture, it is time to discover "the adult within." *Oliver Twist* and "The City of Lost Children" end as a vulnerable heroine risks herself to save a child. Both Dickens' Nancy and Jeunet's Miette are, in some sense, lost. But neither one uses her plight as a reason to turn in on herself and avoid her responsibility to protect someone even younger and more vulnerable than herself.

Nancy and Miette both have the courage to grow up. Will we? ■