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STEPHEN KING'S
**CHILDREN
OF THE
COIN**

CAST

Peter Horton Burt
Linda Hamilton Vicky
R.G. Armstrong Diehl
John Franklin Isaac
Courtney Gains Malachai
Robby Kiger Job
Anne Marie McEvoy Sarah
Julie Maddalena Rachel
Jonas Marlowe Joseph
John Philbin Amos

CREW

Directed by **Fritz Kiersch**
Produced by **Donald P. Borchers** and **Terrence Kirby**
Screenplay by **George Goldsmith**
Based on the Short Story by **Stephen King**
Director of Photography **Raoul Lomas**
Editor **Harry Keramidas**
Art Direction **Craig Stearns**
Music **Jonathan Elias**

A man in a dark coat stands with his arms outstretched, looking upwards. The background is dark and misty, with a faint orange light source visible on the left. The title "CHILDREN OF THE CORN II" is in a stylized font, with the word "CORN" featuring a cross and corn stalks. Below it, "THE FINAL SACRIFICE" is written in a simpler font.

CHILDREN OF THE CORN II

THE FINAL SACRIFICE

CAST

Terence Knox Garrett
Paul Scherrer Danny
Ryan Bollman Micah
Christie Clark Lacey
Rosalind Allen Angela
Ned Romero Red Bear

CREW

Directed by **David F. Price**
Produced by **Scott A. Stone and David G. Stanley**
Written by **A. L. Katz and Gilbert Adler**
Based on the Short Story "Children of the Corn" by **Stephen King**
Director of Photography **Levie Isaacks**
Editor **Barry Zetlin**
Music **Daniel Licht**



CHILDREN OF THE CORN III

URBAN HARVEST

CAST

Daniel Cerny Eli
Ron Melendez Joshua
Michael Ensign Father Frank
Nancy Lee Grahn Alice
Jim Metzler William

CREW

Directed by **James D.R. Hickox**
Produced by **Gary Depew and Brad Southwick**
Written by **Dode B. Levenson**
Based on the Short Story "Children of the Corn" by **Stephen King**
Director of Photography **Gerry Lively**
Editor **Chris Peppe**
Music **Daniel Licht**





CORN TO BE WILD

by Stacie Ponder

There's just something so very wonderful about killer kid movies, isn't there, something that fills one with a strange kind of glee? Perhaps it stems from seeing their wanton upending of our expectations. After all, we've been told that the children are our future. They're supposed to beam angelically or say the darndest things or spend time making glitter macaroni art—they're certainly not supposed to pray to ancient demons and murder us because we're considered too old. But cinematic killer kids fully reject societal norms and order. They're the wildest kind of "down with homework" *Lord of the Flies* savages, the very epitome of the free-spirited rebellion that lurks within the dark recesses of all our hearts.

Movie audiences have delighted to the antics of evil children since Rhoda Penmark, the pigtailed *Bad Seed* herself, tap-danced her way into our lives in 1956 (and then beat us to death with her tap shoes). From that point forward, every decade brought new terrifying tots to the screen, such as *Children of the Damned* (1964), *Devil Times Five* (1974), and *The Omen* (1976) to name but a few.

Bloody Birthday, which concerns a trio of kids born during an eclipse (and thus, born evil), saw only a limited theatrical release in 1981 and didn't make much of a splash, perhaps owing to its arriving during the height of the slasher era. By the mid-80s, however, the heyday of that era was nearing its end under the strain of an oversaturated market and increasingly strict MPAA regulations regarding explicit violence and gore. In 1984, even the formidable *Friday the 13th* franchise released an installment called *The Final Chapter*, although that would soon prove to be, to put it mildly, false advertising. The typical slittings and stabbings from masked killers may have felt a bit tired, but audiences were as hungry as ever for evil kids and Stephen King's juvenile corn-worshipping weirdos hit the spot. *Devil Times Five* is one thing, but *Children of the Corn* asks "How about *Devil Times Town*?"

The opening scenes of *Children of the Corn* are nothing short of iconic (icorinic? sorry). The bucolic laziness of a post-church Sunday in the small farming town of Gatlin, Nebraska is brought to an abrupt, bloody end as the children take up arms against their elders. The special of the day is *carnage* as diner patrons are poisoned and stabbed, their throats are cut, and their limbs are shoved into meat slicers at the behest of Isaac, the child preacher who claims to speak for

He Who Walks Behind the Rows. This isn't one lonesome bad seed dispatching a perceived enemy—this is a bonafide culling in the name of religion, and it's still jaw-dropping today.

Three years later, Joseph, one of the flock, decides he's had enough of the preaching and the *do this's* and the *do not do that's* that compose Isaac's strict, corn-centric religious dogma, and he attempts to flee through the fields. In yet another stunner of a sequence, Joseph's throat is slit and he stumbles into the road, where he's promptly run over by a car. Well, "run over" doesn't quite convey the absolute brutality of what happens to poor Joseph. Director Fritz Kiersch doesn't cut away, doesn't merely hint at the accident by showing us only the aftermath. There's simply the sudden, proper *en-wham-ening* of a child, made all the more shocking for how damn good and realistic the effect is as his lifeless body flies and flops.

Burt and Vicky, the couple who accidentally killed Joseph, are the very picture of arrogant city dwellers who look down their noses at the local yokels. They make fun of the evangelical yelling about hellfire and "homaseckshuls" on the radio as they endure the endless fields of corn lining the road in what's often considered "flyover" country. Like true trope-y protagonists, these "outlanders" soon run afoul of the isolated religious locals they disdain... locals led by a despot who is meddling with cosmic forces he ultimately can't control. Toss in a few human sacrifices, some corn fetishes, and an ancient evil and you've got yourself some folk horror, friend. But by making it killer kid-flavored, Stephen King and screenwriter George Goldsmith melded two genres that had never been melded before, and the results are delicious.

Isaac the preacher and his henchman Malachai are undoubtedly one of horror's greatest dastardly duos. Despite the fact that they are children—although to be fair, there's an uncanniness to Isaac that makes him seem less a child and more a miniature 40-year-old man—they're the kind of horror movie villain you can't wait to see get what's coming to them. In the end, it's doubly satisfying since they prove to be one another's downfall. As he seizes control of the cult, Malachai orders Isaac tied to a corn cross as a sacrifice. Isaac, terrified and extra shrieky, promises the wrath of He Who Walks Behind the Rows over this outrage.

If there is any doubt remaining whether He is merely a myth perpetuated by a strange young evangelical with a penchant for inciting mass murder, it's obliterated when a very large, very unseen something burrows through the dirt toward the sacrificial grounds. Isaac disappears in a wave of sparkling movie magic as his cross rockets into the air, but he soon returns with a sooty face, a demon voice, and patented "explosion hair" to kill Malachai to appease his dark lord.

Children of the Corn gives us a bananas finale but it also maintains the mystery behind its Big Evil... so much so, in fact, that much is left unexplained. Sarah, one half of the brother-sister moppet duo with a penchant for dressing like extras from *Bugsy Malone* (and are present to remind us that—hashtag—not all children are evil), says at one point that Isaac "has always been here, like He Who Walks Behind the Rows." The point is never revisited, so we're left to wonder whether or not Isaac was some kind of otherworldly, eternal highlander or some such. While we do get that incredible explosion hair, those hoping to get a real gander at He Who Walks Behind the Rows get little more than a rolling red cloud and a windstorm.

According to Goldsmith, horror lovers who want an actual monster or a manifested ancient evil are missing the point of the film entirely. In Francesco Borsetti's *It Came from the 80s!: Interviews with 124 Cult Filmmakers*, Goldsmith says, "By the way, did anyone get that *Children of the Corn* is the story of the revolution in Iran, and the consequences to America? That Burt and Vicky were symbolic of the American public, and the Blue Man was the CIA, Malachai was the Ayatollah, and He Who Walks Behind the Rows was the monster of unbridled religious zealotry, i.e. ISIS?"

I fully admit, I missed all of that. And while I am not one to tell a writer what they may or may not have intimated with a script, I would also posit that sometimes a cob is just a cob.

Whatever the intentions behind it, though, *Children of the Corn* was a huge success, which, according to Hollywood customs, demands the existence of a sequel. And so, in 1992, the cornanigans continued in *Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice* (this title, too, would ultimately prove to be false advertising). Whereas most franchises take their time before careening off the rails—even Jason Voorhees didn't head to outer space until the tenth *Friday the 13th*—*Children of the Corn* plays hard and goes for broke in only the second installment.

After the events of the first film, Burt, Vicky, and their moppets made their way to nearby Hemingford to report that the entire adult population of Gatlin had been wiped out three years earlier. (Sure, a cop investigated shortly after the culling, but this Blue Man was sacrificed by Isaac and the gang. When he didn't return to the station, ever, his superiors forgot about him? I guess?) The remaining Gatlin kids, who keep muttering "I saw the corn," are bused to Hemingford where they are taken in by foster families.

Now, you might be thinking that that's a bad idea, and well, that's because it is. Surely these kids are malnourished and traumatized and perhaps even still

murderous? As this is a horror movie, however, that bad idea is actually the best idea. This is made clear in an early scene, as a news crew tries to leave town after reporting on the tragedy. He Who Walks Behind the Rows didn't perish in the burning cornfield at the end of the first film, oh no. He is back and He is more than just a windstorm this time. The news crew is quickly dispatched by not only blue movie lightning but also by the corn itself: it slices, it flies through the air like a javelin... there is nothing, *The Final Sacrifice* tells us, that the corn can't do under His power.

Despite this, He needs a corporeal presence to spout His gospel and gather a young flock that will do His bidding, which is, of course, killing all the adults. And so sullen teen Micah is sucked into a computer Hell dimension where he is swiftly pulled apart into blobs, reconstituted, and reborn as His new leader.

Fortunately for us, Micah, unlike Isaac, is not all talk and no kill. Not only does he instruct his followers to "rid the land of all that defile-eth the corn," he does much of the ridding himself. It's not logistically possible for the kids to rise up and take Hemingford all at once, though, so victims are killed off one by one in incredibly entertaining fashions.

One of the bloodiest, most nauseating scenes in the series finds Micah at a church sermon, whittling away at a wooden totem that—because corn voodoo is a thing now—causes a man to hemorrhage out of nearly every one of his head holes. Later, in what is surely one of the most majestic sequences produced in the entirety of cinematic history, Micah flips a switch on an RC remote that allows him to control an electric wheelchair (which, much like corn voodoo... uh, sure). Mrs. West spins about, cries "What's wrong with mah chay-uh?", and attempts to regain control. Micah engages in some hardcore eyebrow acting. Mrs. West bleats more. It all takes an excruciatingly long time



to get where it's going, but when this *Final Destination*-esque, Rube Goldbergian scene finally gets there, it's nothing short of glorious: Micah steers Mrs. West directly into the path of an oncoming dump truck, which sends her and her wheelchair flying through the air, whereupon it explodes through a plate glass window. If the movie in its entirety consisted of only that one scene, it would still be worth more than the price of admission.

But that's not the film in its entirety. There are enough strange *Wizard of Oz* moments to get you wondering if it's supposed to be something of a horror-comedy. And then there is the well-intentioned, clunky inclusion of Frank Red Bear, a sardonic Native American professor who uses petroglyphs to explain to us and Garrett, the film's protagonist, his theory behind the corn madness. Perhaps it is the result of *koyaanisqatsi*—no, not the 1982 film, but rather the Hopi word itself, meaning "life out of balance." In other words, He Who Walks Behind the Rows is a primal force of nature who is angry at man for defileth-ing not only the corn, but also the Earth itself. Or maybe it's all happening because of some moldy corn. Sadly, before he (or we) can definitively solve the mystery, Frank is killed. This happens during a wild finale that is similar to the one from the previous film: there's a ceremony, corn crosses, the burrowing of the He, angry children... but rather than dodgy composite effects, this finale features dodgy computer effects. Hey, it was the 90s! Even the dodgiest computer effects were cutting edge and realistic-looking to we rubes.

Victorious, Garrett, his son, and a couple of other survivors walk off into the sunrise, but not before taking it upon themselves to give Frank Red Bear a "Native funeral" by setting his corpse atop a pile of corn stalks and setting it alight. Honestly, in a movie that has a wheelchair flying through a window, this ending might actually be the most outrageous thing about *The Final Sacrifice*. They just... burn his body? Without telling anyone? Like his family, maybe?! Oh well. Regardless of my feelings about it, Frank's spirit seems pleased when it returns in full buckskin regalia and wanders off into the woods.

As for the franchise, it wanders all the way to Chicago for 1995's *Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest*. Joshua and his younger step-brother Eli, survivors from all the deadly doings in Gatlin, are shipped off to the big city and fostered by a well-meaning middle-class couple. Eli may have rosy cheeks and a polite manner, but it doesn't take long for his nefarious side to emerge. He's brought a suitcase full of corn from home for plantin'—corn that whispers "Give us your blood!" I might add—and it quickly grows, thanks to the power of evil, in the courtyard of an abandoned factory.

As Joshua attempts to move beyond his small town, oppressively religious roots and make new friends, Eli makes like Isaac and Micah before him and





gathers together youths committed to the cause of He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Eli puts his own twist on things, however. He doesn't kill through proxies, as Isaac did, nor does he kill with remote controls and corn voodoo. Instead, Eli kills with the corn itself: specifically, with magical corn kernels that turn into bugs before and/or after they're ingested. They might induce a slow death upon whomever consumed them, or they might immediately turn one's insides to bugs. Does it make sense? No. But also... absolutely yes, for this is a corniverse where anything goes.

If *The Final Sacrifice* went off the rails, *Urban Harvest* was never on the rails to begin with. Living scarecrows, fireball fights, "corn experiments," powerful but evil Bibles festooned with corn... *Urban Harvest* really has it all, including what we've been waiting for since 1984: He Who Walks Behind the Rows in all His full glory. Not solely burrowing through the ground, not manifesting only as a storm cloud, no. He is there, on screen and visible, and he is a wonder of a monstrous, slimy flesh pile with chomping teeth and flailing limbs. Yes indeed, this third film has the most bonkers climax of them all as Eli's flock falls to impalements, quicksand, and all manner of deadly corn-related mishaps. Look, you simply haven't lived until you see Him eat the film's heroine, by which I mean you see what is very obviously a doll waving its arms and legs stop-motion-ly as it's crammed into the mouth of a monster puppet. It's the kind of scene that makes you happy movies were invented at all.

Since it burrowed into our hearts nearly forty years ago, *Children of the Corn* has gone on to become one of horror's unlikeliest, yet most enduring franchises. While each later film in the series has its own highs, lows, and creamy middles, none reach the lofty heights of madness of the original trilogy. Still, there is always hope that a new evil child preacher will whip his or her followers into another over-the-top, amusingly murderous frenzy. After all, if He Who Walks Behind the Rows has taught me one thing, it's that corn—and the children who kill for it—will find a way.

Stacie Ponder is a writer, artist, and podcaster specializing in horror movies and horror-flavored video games. A regular columnist for *Rue Morgue*, she is the author of *Slashers 101*, *The Bed*, and *Death Count: All of the Deaths in the Friday the 13th Film Series*, *Illustrated*. With artist/performer Anthony Hudson, she co-hosts the weekly podcast *Gaylords of Darkness*, which looks at horror movies through a queer lens.



CHILDREN OF THE CORN

by John Sullivan

(The following essay may contain certain spoilers. Watching the film first is recommended.)

Growing up in the Midwest, from the rising heat of summer to the anticipated relief of fall, there wasn't a day that went by when I didn't make my way past a quickly rising or endless field of corn. For me, and for others like me, it was the norm. An everyday sight I saw every day. But in 1984, everything changed when a film was released that would take the rules about the innocence of children and the non-threatening sea of mid-western cornfields and completely turn them on their head.

CORN STORIES

Taken from the written work of horror master Stephen King, *Children of the Corn* originally appeared in the March 1977 issue of *Penthouse*, and was then included in King's 1978 short story collection *Night Shift*. As his undeniable popularity and demand for film adaptations of his novels grew, it was evident that the story of the unfortunate fate of fictional Gatlin, Nebraska wouldn't be far behind. As King himself penned a script that would bring the corn to life, the version that ultimately made it to the big screen differed somewhat from the story originally envisioned. With studio executive Donald Borchers, producer Terry Kirby, and director Fritz Kiersch at the helm, pre-production began on New World Pictures' officially titled feature, "*Stephen King's Children of the Corn*." Fresh with a newly-written screenplay by George Goldsmith, casting choices were made with Linda Hamilton as Vicky, Peter Horton as Burt, John Franklin as Isaac, Courtney Gains as Malachai, Robby Kiger as Job, Anne Marie McEvoy as Sarah, Jonas Marlowe as Joseph, John Philbin as Amos, Julie Maddalena as Rachel, and veteran Hollywood actor R.G. Armstrong as gas station attendant Chester Diehl. But as the main characters were set, there were two major roles essential to the film that still had to be cast. No Corn. No Gatlin. No Movie.

WELCOME TO GATLIN: THE NICEST LITTLE TOWNS IN IOWA

Corn was an intricate and crucial part of the story, and when the producers scouted the tall, green-stalked fields of Iowa in 1983, they found what they were looking for. But as much as the cornfields played one of the biggest roles in the film, the look and feel of the streets and buildings within the town of Gatlin had to be just as believable. Enter Whiting, Hornick, Salix, and Sioux City. As the three smaller towns had what they needed visually for all of the exterior scenes, Sioux City was used for a number of interior shots including Job and Sarah's house, the Town Hall/Police Station, Grace Baptist Church of Gatlin, and Burt and Vicky's motel room. The exteriors were then filmed in Whiting (Main Street/flagpole/Town Hall, Hansen's Café), Hornick (Job and Sarah's house, Hansen's Café, main road), Salix (side street), and also the city of Sergeant Bluff which was used for the exterior of Burt and Vicky's motel. Watching the movie, you would never know that Gatlin was made up of different towns. But by using a section or a road from the three locations, it worked so well that unless you were a citizen or familiar with the area, it seemed like you were driving or running through one individual community. But there was one last role to fill. Many roles actually. And they were to be found not in Hollywood, but right from the corn-surrounded towns in Iowa.

CREATING THE CHILDREN

As the filmmakers descended on Siouxland, a call went out to cast the most important characters in the film: the Children. Just like the town and buildings themselves, the adolescents from Gatlin had to be believable. After holding a casting session at the local Howard Johnson's, many excited kids from Sioux City and the surrounding area were about to be in a motion picture for the first time. While smaller groups would be used for the café massacre and Vicky's abduction at the house, larger groups would be needed for many of the cornfield sequences with Isaac and Malachai and the church scene revolving around Amos's birthday. Also, there was very little individual speaking on the children's part, so most of the dialogue was done by them in the form of chanting "Kill!" or "The Blue Man. Yes, the Blue Man." Even today, the production still gets credited for its casting of some of the best extras in film.

JUST ANOTHER SUNDAY AFTERNOON

One of the most revealing scenes in the movie happens three years prior, just after church in the small farming town of Gatlin. As we see young Job and his dad enter the town café, we find out that Job's sister Sarah is home sick in bed and is doing a color drawing. While all the adults are preoccupied with their lunch and other things, the teenagers, with guidance from religious

leader Isaac, take control of the café and town. We then see what Sarah has been drawing—a picture of the massacre as it happened. Even though they were made to look like a child's illustrations, the drawings were in fact done by an adult artist by the name of Judeanne Winter and director Fritz Kiersch. As many versions of the drawings were created, only some of them appeared onscreen in the finished film. It's also interesting to note that, while completing some of her work, Judeanne used her opposite hand to make them appear as if a younger person had drawn them. Although the carnage at the café was a predecessor of what was to come, if you watch closely you'll notice a few of the main characters have slightly shorter, clean-cut hairstyles. This was due to the fact that the backstory of the town was actually filmed near the end of the production. Ah, the powers of movie magic.

CUTTING THE CORN

As with many productions, there are scenes that don't always make the final theatrical version. For years, a rumored "Director's Cut" has been said to have made at least one television broadcast outing, with longer takes and additional sequences that added a bit more screen time to a few of the characters' roles. While the truth of this is still open to question, it has sparked much corn-fueled discussion over the years as to whether or not the footage exists. When initial first-run advertising for the film started to appear in a number of movie and horror-genre related publications, it showcased one scene that would not survive the final "Harvesting," so to speak. Shot in a former train depot in Sioux City, a scene depicting the murder of a Gatlin policeman, the Blue Man, would forever be a part of many *Children of the Corn* fans' requests for restored footage for a special edition release. Unlike the other unconfirmed deleted scenes, with the promotional stills in magazines of the policeman's murder and also images on the backs of the Embassy Home Entertainment CED Videodisc and Laserdisc, there is proof of its one-time existence. Unfortunately, while much work has been done to find and track down the elusive "Blue Man" footage, it seems that, for now, it remains lost in the cornfield.

EXPLOSIONS AND WHEELBARROWS

How do you create a monster, underground, in a cornfield in Iowa, while on a tight budget? Using a backhoe, a trench was dug wherein wooden tracks were placed. On top of these tracks, a wheelbarrow was turned upside down and covered with loose soil down the track. When the wheelbarrow was pulled, it raised the ground and horror fans were introduced to He Who Walks Behind the Rows. As for the finale of the film, Burt is to set the cornfield on fire, thus destroying the demonic force underneath and creating a cloud-like

explosion. For this effect, another trench was dug to hold a number of barrels and gasoline was then placed inside. It was an event many townspeople from the area were excited to see.

LEGACY OF THE CORN

It has been more than thirty years since the film was released to theaters everywhere and yet, even now, the words "Children of the Corn" are recognized all over the world as a permanent fixture and household name in the cinematic dictionary of pop culture and fear. Since its theatrical release, many home video formats have played host to the original film including VHS, Beta, Laserdisc, CED Videodisc, DVD, Sony PlayStation UMD, and an array of Blu-ray incarnations, the most recent of which you now hold in your hands. Corn fans love the 1984 original and the characters of Isaac and Malachai hold a special place with them. But what is it that frightens us so much about deserted towns with children running amok? Now an adult, those three words always cross my mind whenever I pass through a small town and see a towering field of green. An adult nightmare. That thought frightens me. With a total of seven sequels (one of which saw the return of the characters Isaac and Rachel and was also written by John Franklin), a "Re-Harvesting" by Donald Borchers, and a 2020 remake, it seems the franchise itself refuses to hide behind the rows. As long as Outlanders keep visiting the "Nicest Little Town In Nebraska," it seems the legacy, and the cornfields of Gatlin, are unlikely ever to stop growing.

John Sullivan is a Children of the Corn film historian and creator of ChildrenoftheCornMovie.com.





BENEATH THE ROWS:

THE ANTI-GOSPEL OF CHILDREN OF THE CORN

by Craig Martin

When Stephen King first published "Children of the Corn" in *Penthouse* in March 1977, little did he know that his short story would go on to inspire what has become one of the most prolific horror film franchises of all time. Released in 1984 by New World Pictures, the film performed well at the box office, appearing as it did when public interest in big screen adaptations of King's work was at an all-time high. The year before had seen John Carpenter, Lewis Teague, and David Cronenberg turn their filmmaking attention to adaptations of, respectively, *Christine*, *Cujo*, and *The Dead Zone*. The first theatrical release adapted from a King short story, *Children of the Corn* went on to develop a cult following on home video, cultivating a further ten films that together have made the series the most copious collection of killer kids ever assembled on screen. This is an impressive feat considering the long history of the evil child in film, not to mention its literary antecedents.

Ask most film scholars and horror movie devotees when the evil child first got its start, and most answers will likely be Mervyn LeRoy's 1956 melodrama *The Bad Seed* starring Patty McCormack as Rhoda Penmark, a sociopathic killer child whose predilection for homicide is inherited from her serial killer grandmother. The film is adapted from the book by Alabama novelist William March, whose traumatic experiences as a soldier in WWI Germany, and again in Berlin when the Nazis seized power (he was there working for a US shipping company), left him with an abiding fascination with evil. Exploring evil as an innate flaw in the human condition, March turned to childhood to present a case study in which nature trumps nurture in determining sociopathy. William Paul in his highly entertaining study of '70s and '80s gross-out cinema titled *Laughing Screaming: Hollywood Horror and Comedy* considers *The Bad Seed* the urtext upon which later incarnations of the evil child are based.¹ Paul's reasoning is sound, and yet does not account for earlier iterations of evil children.

A decade earlier Leslie Fenton directed a WWII anti-fascist propaganda film called *Tomorrow the World* (1944) in which a widowed American professor played by William March learns that his sister and her German husband have

been murdered by the Nazis and left behind a young son. With a daughter of his own, the professor adopts the boy and brings him to America, only to discover he is a fanatical member of the Hitler Youth. Skip Homeier makes his screen debut as budding young Nazi Emil Bruckner, an apple so rotten that his behaviour contaminates the other boys in town. His despicability escalates until he tries to bludgeon to death the professor's kind-hearted young daughter when she finds him snooping through the top-secret files her father is working on for the war department.

Tomorrow the World introduces a motif that will eventually become a key convention in evil child films: adoption. In an essay on adoption in evil child films, Martin and Heller-Nicholas observe that "adoption has long been a commonly employed narrative trope in the child-as-monster film that exploits and magnifies the stigmas associated with adoption's assumed inferiority to biological kinship."² They point out how adoption is present in *The Bad Seed* and observe how it is used to introduce evil as a threat to the traditional nuclear family in such films as *Mikey* (1992), directed by Dennis Dimster, and Jaime Collet-Serra's 2009 film *Orphan*. We can, of course, also see the trope of adoption at work in all three *Children of the Corn* films, with parts II and III relying heavily on the threat of the evil adopted child becoming a fear fulfilled.

While it would be easy to conclude that *Tomorrow the World* provided audiences with cinema's first evil child, a decade earlier William Wyler's first adaptation of *The Children's Hour*, retitled *These Three* (1936), introduced audiences to bad seed Mary Tilford, convincingly played by Bonita Granville. Mary is a cruel, entirely selfish child whose deceit destroys the lives of a pair of dedicated hard-working teachers. During a period when acclaimed British novelist Graham Greene published film criticism, he was impressed with how in *These Three*, "the more than human evil of the lying sadistic child is suggested with quite shocking mastery" by Granville, concluding that the film "has enough truth and intensity to stand for the whole of the dark side of childhood."³ *These Three* may well be the first sound film to feature a child monster, however the early silent era was awash with them in all manner of prank films, dating back to 1895, that oftentimes drew inspiration from comic strips or 19th century American "bad boy" books that featured stories of pre-adolescent lads up to no good. Curiously, many of the situations depicted in early prank films are repeated in later horror films, such as children setting adults on fire, or pushing them into pits, suggesting that when it comes to kids, there are a series of violent behaviours endemic to the age group.

One can locate in history books endless accounts of evil children in western culture that, according to theology scholar Eric Ziolkowski date back to the

biblical story of the bad boys of Bethel described in 2 Kings 2:23-24.⁴ The passage tells of how the prophet Elisha, while passing near the town of Bethel, is accosted and mocked by a large group of youths. The prophet deals with the boys by summoning a large bear that chases and mauls them. Ziolkowski argues that this brief episode in scripture has been endlessly reproduced in religious art across millennia and accounts for the presence of evil children in film. The mention of scripture, prophets and biblical names, of course, returns us to the *Children of the Corn* films, which trade in allusions to the Old Testament wrath that characterises much of the evangelical fundamentalism associated with Bible Belt America.

Although *Children of the Corn I, II, and III* differ in style and content, taken together the three motion pictures form an oddly unified narrative that coheres around a perverse anti-gospel motif of ever-spreading darkness. Instead of a gospel of love and forgiveness such as that taught in the Christian faith, the anti-gospel of the *Children of the Corn* films is one of zealous retribution that perverts the role of the child from a symbol of futurity to one of endless bloodthirsty apocalypticism. From the first film to the third there occurs a distinct expansion of the chthonic sect worshipping "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" so that what started out as a secluded rural fanatical cult eventually expands to become a pious paedocracy with an influence that spreads with each successive film.

In its first screen incarnation, "Children of the Corn" was among the earliest of King's "Dollar Babies," launched in 1982 with Jeff Schiro's strikingly effective short film adaptation of *The Boogeyman*. "Dollar Babies" is the term King gave to his initiative granting film students the rights to adapt his material for the princely sum of one dollar. In 1983 King gave his consent to student filmmaker John Woodward to adapt "Children of the Corn" into a short film that Woodward renamed *Disciples of the Crow*. For the most part, Woodward's film maintains narrative fidelity to its source material, though he does change the name of the town from Gatlin, Nebraska to Jonah, Oklahoma. Where quarrelling couple Burt and Vicki suffer gruesome fates at the end of King's short story, in Woodward's film they appear to escape a horde of marauding children with their lives... or do they? Speeding away in their damaged car, Burt grapples to comprehend how a community of killer children could have remained a secret for so long. "Unless," he muses, "that god they worship approves." Still reeling, Burt fails to notice the temperature gauge on the dash flashing red, unaware that a corn cob jammed through the front grille has punctured his radiator.

Woodward's film suggests that there is some kind of collusion at work between the children and the many crows seen throughout the film. During the closing credits, hundreds of birds in flight fill the frame and overwhelm the

soundtrack with their chirring screams, recalling the opening credits of *The Birds*. The thematic link to Hitchcock's 1963 film may seem random, and yet recent arguments have been made by film scholars affirming that the wave of monster child films that began in the late 1960s owes a significant debt to *The Birds*, in much the same way that the slasher film has been traced back to *Psycho*. Let us take a momentary detour, like Vicki and Burt, and explore the relationship between Hitchcock's *The Birds* and the evil child.

Most critics that have written on *The Birds* concur that the avian marauders in the film seek to attack and kill the children of Bodega Bay, and yet there is no definitive evidence presented on screen to confirm this. Indeed, the motivation of the bird attacks remains a mystery, leading to all manner of critical speculation and theorising ever since the film's release almost sixty years ago. Within this open field of explanatory possibilities, the argument can be made that the children are actually being assisted by the birds to escape acculturation by a corrupt adult society. It is the role and responsibility of each successive generation to produce offspring and educate them sufficiently to take over from the previous generation, which amounts to perpetuating the status quo and ensuring the continuity of an established social order. No one knows why the birds stage their coordinated assaults, and yet one thing is clear: the bird attacks are apocalyptic to the extent that they threaten to destabilise the existing social order.

The most important institution within the social order is the family because through it, society can ensure its survival as successive generations are taught to adhere to the particular roles, values, laws, and customs upon which society is built. In his study of horror cinema, film critic Robin Wood explains that for the social order to function properly and fulfil its purpose, which is ultimately to serve the needs of the ruling class, particular groups of people need to be repressed. These include the working class, women, and certain ethnic groups. But the demographic that Wood identifies as the most oppressed are children because of their unique role within the social order. He states without any irony that, "what the previous generation repressed in us, we, in turn, repress in our children, seeking to mould them into replicas of ourselves, perpetuators of a discredited tradition."⁵ Wood's ideas may seem radical, but they can be seen in the work of the 18th century Romantics who elevated the status of children in their art, viewing them as close to nature. They believed that the innocence and purity of childhood was strangled and corrupted by a cruel society. If we apply this idea of children being close to nature as well as victims of a repressive society to *The Birds*, something curious takes place that has ramifications for the *Children of the Corn* films as well as the entire subgenre of evil children that followed.



In Hitchcock's film there are two scenes in which birds appear to attack children. The first incident takes place in the Brenner's backyard during Cathy's birthday party while the second occurs as a group of schoolchildren are fleeing the Bodega Bay schoolhouse. It is this second episode that the film uses to suggest the children are in peril. During a conversation at the bayside restaurant following the incident, Melanie Daniels speculates evil intent as she describes the attack. Unable to believe what she is hearing, local ornithologist Mrs. Bundy enquires as to what Melanie thinks motivated the incident.

"I think," Melanie replies, "they were after the children."

"For what purpose?" presses Mrs Bundy, not concealing her scepticism.

"To kill them," comes Melanie's frank reply.

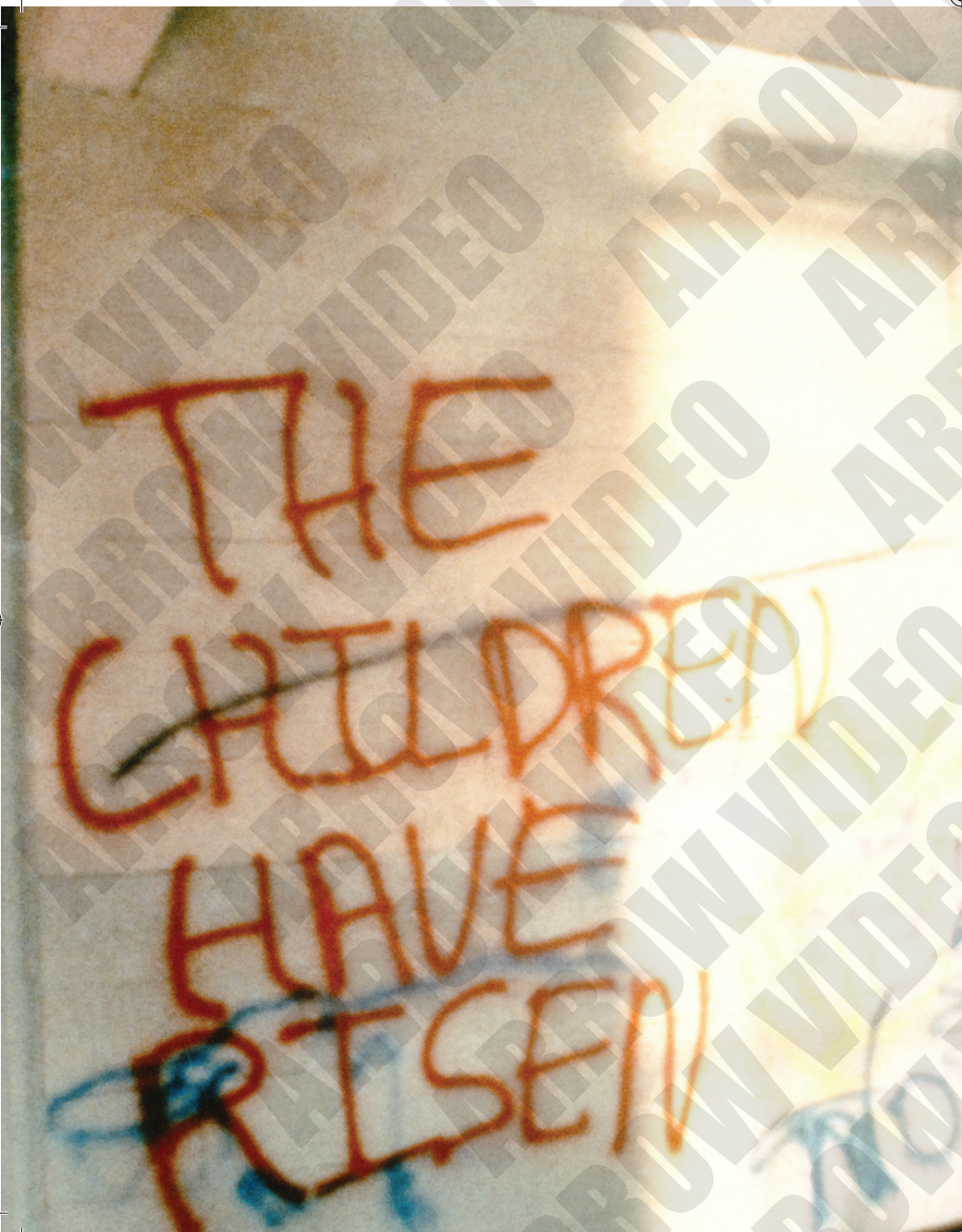
It is this assessment of the birds as killers of children that has influenced subsequent readings of the film. And Melanie's conclusion is certainly understandable. Only the day before a flock of gulls descended on Cathy's birthday party at the very moment the children began a game of blind man's bluff. Yet was it the children the birds were after, or their teacher, Annie Hayworth? We see Annie in action later in the film, demanding obedience from the class of children sitting behind desks all neatly arranged in rows. As Bodega Bay's only teacher, Annie is charged with the responsibility of readying the town's children to become effective adult citizens who will properly conform to the status quo. If the birds seek to liberate the children from the corrupting influence of adulthood, Annie would be a key target. It seems odd for Annie to be in charge of Cathy's birthday, for how many 11-year-olds would actually want such a figure of authority controlling their special day?

It is during the game of blind man's bluff, while Cathy is blindfolded, that a gull swoops down at her. The power of the birds to injure people is convincingly demonstrated several times in the film, first when Melanie is struck by a gull with enough force to draw blood and give her a concussion, and again when a single gull manages to render a gas station attendant unconscious. However, when Cathy is struck, she is in no way hurt, and yet is far more vulnerable than either Melanie or the attendant by virtue of her age and being blindfolded. Yet she simply calls out, "Hey, no touching" as though the gull is in on the game. Just before the schoolhouse incident audiences are shown the bloodied corpse of Dan Fawcett in his bedroom following a bird attack, covered in lacerations with his eyes pecked out, demonstrating the terrible power of the birds. Yet at the schoolhouse when the crows appear to "attack" the children,

no child is injured, except maybe a girl who suffers a scrape when she falls hard to the ground. If anything, it is as though the crows are driving the children away from the school and its stultifying influence. If that is not enough, soon after the schoolhouse incident it is revealed that the crows have killed Annie, as though getting to the schoolteacher was their purpose all along. But what does all this have to do with *Children of the Corn*?

The importance of *The Birds* to the history of horror films has been well documented. In an essay on Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, film scholar, Richard Dillard contends that *The Birds* is the "artistic antecedent"⁶ of the modern zombie horror movie and Andrew Tudor rightly explains how Hitchcock's film established codes that govern ecology-based revenge of nature horror films in which animals rise out of subjugation to dominate and destroy humans.⁷ *The Birds* establishes power relations between humans and birds early in the film when Mitch and Melanie first meet at the pet store in San Francisco, surrounded by birds in cages and unquestioning in their cosy assumption that humans are the dominant species on earth. This power dynamic is completely reversed as the birds take over, forcing humans to take shelter in their homes, caged like the parrots, canaries, and finches in the pet store. That the Bodega Bay schoolhouse looks a lot like one of the cages in the pet store opens the possibility of comparing the children trapped in classrooms all day with birds stuck in cages. Meanwhile the crows gather on the play equipment in the schoolyard, listening to the children sing, while visually aligning themselves with the children. This strange inversion of power that we see in Hitchcock's film is one we see repeated in film after film where adults are overcome by evil children and, likewise, in revenge of nature horror films. For our purposes, the alignment of children with birds and the inversion of power seen in both subgenres begins with Woodward's *Disciples of the Crow* where crows and children collude to kill grown-ups. This inversion then becomes a leitmotif found across the series.

The generic collision of nature and children is self-evident in Fritz Kiersch's *Children of the Corn* as the corn stalks present a vegetal threat to human dominion, somehow sentient and capable of moving by themselves. Much like *Disciples of the Crow*, *Children of the Corn* opens with the massacre of unsuspecting adults by their children, returning the action to the small Nebraskan town of Gatlin in King's story. Like the citizens of Bodega Bay, the people of Gatlin do not know what hits them until it is too late, confident in their version of normality where adults dominate children who are small, weak, and without agency. Commanding the attack is child preacher Isaac, while his most zealous apostle Malachai coordinates the grisly ambush. Wearing a black suit and wide-brimmed hat in a style recalling the costumes of the



Pennsylvanian Hittites in Wes Craven's *Deadly Blessing* (1981), Isaac swans through the town and watches with grim approval as his young followers unquestioningly murder parents, grandparents, and family friends. That the killings take place directly following the conclusion of Sunday service at the Grace Baptist Church reinforces the theme of radical religiosity at the heart of the film as the Christian god is displaced by a pagan deity that has consumed and corrupted the heart of Gatlin.

The remainder of Kiersch's film follows hapless interlopers Burt and Vicki. Rather than meeting a terrible fate in the cornfield as they do at the end of King's short story, Burt and Vicki manage to escape with the only two children in the town that don't fall under Isaac's spell: siblings Job and Sarah. They are presented as "normal," being the only youngsters in Gatlin not to participate in the massacre. Their normality is reinforced in how they are presented as innocents with Job providing voiceover narrative early in the film, eliciting audience empathy. While Sarah and Job present as the only trustworthy children in Gatlin, in the context of the wider story comprising all three films, their role is insidious for they serve "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" by assisting Burt and Vicki to escape Gatlin in order to guarantee spread of the demon's anti-gospel.

Sarah especially becomes a critical conduit of Gatlin's dark entity, providing supernatural foresight through her artwork. Burt and Vicki's arrival is foretold in one of her sketches, prompting Isaac to declare her blessed with the "gift of sight." Isaac then speaks the words given to him by the entity: "I will send outlanders amongst you: a man and a woman. And these outlanders will be unbelievers and profaners of the holy. And the man will sorely test you, for he has great power." Burt does indeed test the children of Gatlin. With the help of Job, he saves Vicki and seems to destroy "He Who Walks Behind the Rows". As they set out on their trek to nearby Hemingford, Burt and Vicki spontaneously resolve to take Job and Sarah with them. Or perhaps it is not spontaneous. After all, the two children have attached themselves like barnacles to the couple and the four of them together form a nuclear family in what is an unconvincing and abrupt happy ending. In effect, Burt and Vicki adopt Job and Sarah, and as we have already learned, adoption in evil child narratives never goes well.

Where *Children of the Corn* begins with the massacre of Gatlin's adults, *Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice*, directed by David Price, opens with the gruesome discovery of the adults' bodies rotting in a basement. The discovery, we learn, is made possible by a couple who, according to the sheriff, "were passing through Gatlin on vacation." While only a small detail, the sheriff's version of events differs from what audiences of the first film know

to be the case, providing insight into the dubious nature of his character. In contradistinction to the first film in which Gatlin is a veritable ghost town when Burt and Vicki arrive, in the sequel it is a veritable hive of activity with journalists having descended from across the nation to report on an event that is being compared to the events at Jonestown. And so it is that the anti-gospel of "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" begins its spread.

The opening sequence in Gatlin economically assembles most of the key players in the film, including several victims-to-be: Sheriff Blaine, Mr. Simpson, and Mrs. Burke. This last character, a histrionic retired teacher played by Marty Terry, arrives on a bicycle just as the bus carrying the Gatlin orphans is about to leave. Standing in its way, she declares that the children are all murderers, and a similar fate awaits the people of Hemingford if the town takes them in. Dismissed as a hysterical old woman, the people of Hemingford are as unsuspecting as the adults of Gatlin, who paid with their lives for underestimating the agency of children.

As an aside, Mrs. Burke's character provides a cluster of entertaining gags all based on *The Wizard of Oz*. She rides a bicycle like Mrs. Gulch, waves a broomstick at a group of Gatlin children, and talks about taking her house with her when she leaves Hemingford. This same house, raised on hydraulic stumps in readiness for relocation, is literally dropped on Mrs. Burke while she is crawling beneath to retrieve her cat. The cat's name, Almira, happens to be the first name of the Wicked Witch of the West. And while Mrs. Burke's first name is Ruby, her sister in the film, also played by Terry, is Mrs. West. There are other smatterings of references to *The Wizard of Oz* elsewhere in the film that attentive viewers will surely enjoy.

Arriving late to the media circus is John Garret and his angry, estranged teenage son Danny. They quarrel bitterly on the drive into Gatlin, recalling the hostility between Burt and Vicki in King's short story that also featured in Woodward's short film. Writing for a disreputable New York tabloid, John is desperate to break a story that will further his career. Through John's investigation, the film provides various explanations for the events that took place in Gatlin, as well as those that occur in Hemingford. He visits some of the sites around Gatlin, including the schoolhouse that, more than any other building in the town, is the most trashed. As he walks through the hallways, graffiti on all the walls includes one message declaring "School is out." Elsewhere the word "defiler" is scrawled repeatedly, providing insight into how Gatlin's children view education, while recalling the crows in *The Birds* interrupting the state-sanctioned indoctrination of the children of Bodega Bay and ridding them of their teacher.

While at the school John meets Frank Redbear who takes on several expository roles in the film: mystical indigenous American sidekick, anthropology professor, and agricultural expert. Somehow he knows all about the dangers of a toxic fungus that grows on rotting corn. Frank surmises that the green fungus has become airborne and explains the various maladies inhaling it can cause: "madness... panic, hallucinations, especially in children," and offers this as the most logical explanation for the volatile behaviour of Gatlin's youth. Where science fails to provide a logical answer, Indian mysticism steps in with "koyaanisqatsi," an indigenous American word used by the Hopi people that means "life out of balance." Various explanations are offered for the events taking place in Hemingford, but no adult can conceive that a subterranean entity is responsible for empowering children to defy authority and dismantle the established social order.

Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice ends in much the same way as the first film, with a fiery climax in the cornfield and the ostensible demise of the ancient maize demon and his bloodthirsty cult. John and his son Danny, having bonded over this traumatic experience, both find romance with local women, Angela and Lacey. As the four survivors climb into Angela's red convertible and return to life in the city, the question of whether the anti-gospel of "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" will continue its spread hangs ominously, answered in the final film in this triptych of terror.

Where the first and second *Children of the Corn* films portray a limited variation of Aesop's country mouse city mouse fable, focusing on urban dwellers who barely survive their time in the American heartland, *Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest* provides the other half of the fable. The anti-gospel of "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" is brought from Gatlin to inner city Chicago by a young rural missionary named Eli. Together with older orphan cult member Joshua, Eli is adopted by a childless couple and brought to the city. At their new high school Joshua quickly acculturates to his new surroundings, finding friends and updating his modest rural wardrobe with the latest fashions. Meanwhile Eli remains focused on nothing other than his veneration for "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" and begins to spread his message among his teenage peers.

The film perverts the parable of the sower told by Christ in which a farmer scatters seed in a field that falls on various types of ground. Each terrain symbolises different audiences who, on hearing the gospel, respond in different ways. Among the four types in the parable is seed that falls on soil where it is choked by thorns, representative of the person who hears the word but soon is more concerned with the cares and pleasures of life. The fourth kind of seed in the parable is that which falls on fertile land and grows to produce a great

harvest, representative of the person who, on hearing God's word, lives their life by it and becomes fruitful as they spread the gospel to others. Like the seed that falls among the thorns, Joshua turns his back on the blood cult of the corn, seduced instead by the life of contemporary urban American youth. Meanwhile, Eli remains on the straight and narrow and begins to win converts to his cult. Like the farmer in the parable, he takes his corn, transported from Gatlin in his suitcase, and sows it on soil in a derelict industrial estate. Here the corn takes root and the cult of "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" is reborn.

Where the earlier films resist showing the corporeal entity that moves beneath the soil like one of Ron Underwood's "graboids" in *Tremors* (1990), *Urban Harvest* reveals the Cthulhu-esque beast that rises from the earth to consume fleeing teens. While the destruction of the chimeric giant is hurried and somewhat anticlimactic, in the wider context of the ever-spreading anti-gospel of "He Who Walks Behind the Rows," its demise is, like the beasts in the earlier films, inconsequential. Embodying the antichrist behind the film's anti-gospel, the beast, like the Christ of the New Testament, can't be kept down. Eli has successfully used the corrupting greed of adulthood to seduce his adoptive father into helping him spread his blood cult around the world via an international distribution deal for his corn, paralleling the plenitude of lucrative *Children of the Corn* sequels, prequels, and reboots produced by Dimension Films that have followed.

Aesop's fable tells of how country life is too plain for the sophisticated town mouse while the country mouse finds itself terrified in town where life moves fast and danger lurks around every turn. *Urban Harvest* inverts this narrative so that the kids from the country are not threatened by the fast pace and perils of city life but are themselves the threat. As a triptych, the *Children of the Corn* films form a cohesive narrative that follows the ever-widening influence of an evil entity reliant upon the figure of the child. "He Who Walks Behind the Rows" and the children that form his cult exist in a symbiotic relationship in which the children sustain the entity with their blood and the blood of unwary adults while the entity offers the children agency and an opportunity to move out from under the weight of the social order. The films draw on a rich and extensive range of theological and literary allusions not discussed here—such as Shirley Jackson's post-WWII short story of Southern Gothic sacrifice in "The Lottery"—and sources from European horror cinema like Narciso Ibáñez Serrador's startling 1976 film *Who Can Kill a Child?* (*¿Quién puede matar a un niño?*) Perhaps it is the series' tendency to draw from such a wide field that has sustained it for so long and provided popular culture with its most fecund collection of evil child texts.

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PRAISE GOD! PRAISE THE LORD!

THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHILD PREACHER IN REFERENCE TO CHILDREN OF THE CORN

by Lee Gambin

Fevered child preachers heading a cult of murderous bloodthirsty youngsters highlights horror's vested interest of innocence made corrupt, and the violent reaction to oppressive trappings of responsibility which runs parallel with the banality of adulthood. Fusing the oft-used cinematic subgenre of the evil child film with a religious backbone and an acute commentary on the power of influence and blind dedication to a malevolent "cause," the unsettling eeriness of the midwest's Bible Belt and the golden-hued terrain of American Gothic, Fritz Kiersch's *Children of the Corn* sits firmly within the realm of author Stephen King's keen devotion in exploring the sinister undertones of organised religion and its influence on the gullible all-American. King has always examined the sinister hidden agenda used by self-professed religious types in his works and this is a recurring thematic element. In his novel *Carrie* (1974), Christian zealot Margaret White uses religious fundamentalism to dominate and torture her daughter which ultimately leads to a fiery hell being unleashed upon earth; in *Salem's Lot* (1975), the booze addled Father Callahan is weak in faith and no help in defending a small town from a vampire infestation; and here in this filmic adaptation of King's short story, which first appeared in an issue of *Penthouse* (March, 1977) and then in the collected work *Night Shift* (1978), children in rural Nebraska follow a religious doctrine that orders them to slaughter the adult population.

The multiple mythic elements behind *Children of the Corn*'s aesthetic direction as well as its varied visual set pieces are heavily influenced by both Christian art and culture and pagan folklore. Burt (Peter Horton) finding the illustration depicting the fire breathing dragon blowing a stream of flames upon a maiden lost within the high corn is straight out of medieval European legend, while the image of Vicky (Linda Hamilton) being hoisted up on a husk-riddled cross is a blatant mockery of Christ's crucifixion—therefore, the film combines earthy old world religions with Judeo-Christian ideology that reflects the motives,

presentation and performative onslaughts of child preachers from the turn of the century all the way through into the 1970s. These children of God's teachings—who peaked in popularity during the era of America's vaudeville days—were a bizarre combination of sideshow freak and “serious” religious leader. Much like the aforementioned influence of both fire and brimstone folklore and Christian ethos, these pint-sized brothers and sisters of the cloth were an extension of the monstrous otherworldliness of spectacle and spiritually-bent show business.

Within America's strange history and bizarre romance with child preachers, the unnerving philosophy of “rescuing the polluted souls of the adult” is a much repeated mantra and usually born from the conceptualized understanding that all people (most notably people over the age of eighteen) are unaware “sinners.” In a chilling moment from the film, the freckled-faced redhead enforcer Malachai (Courtney Gaines) promises Vicky relief from her “sinful adulthood,” telling her “We've come to give you peace.” This fear and hatred of “growing old” is what propels the core narrative intention of *Children of the Corn*; the belief that once infancy and adolescence are outgrown then the spirit of humanity turns corrupt and insincere. The film (and Stephen King's short story) spins Christian fundamentalism on its head—delving into the rhetoric and diatribe of organised western religion, but also fusing it with pagan intent and earthbound bounty. The promise of a prosperous cornfield is at the heart of the children's belief system, and that to slay the adults to feed the dry earth will bring forth the healthy plentiful corn that will feed and nourish the youngsters bringing them closer to their deity, He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Interestingly enough, He Who Walks Behind the Rows is presented as more of a pagan god than a Judeo-Christian one, therefore the film uses Christianity and the Bible-bashing of fundamentalism and evangelical service as a flamboyant front, even enlisting turn of the century prayer and vocabulary spouted out by the crazed and psychotic midwest tots.

The promise of healing, exorcism, good fortune, and spiritual salvation was part of many sermons delivered by child preachers throughout history, and the appeal of the infantile bible basher is a complicated and fascinating one. The idea that an innocent (“...and a little child shall lead them”, Isaiah 11:6) will guide and direct the populous to the path of the righteous is a primal conception but one severely marked with an exploitation angle. Fritz Kiersch's adaptation of Stephen King's story most certainly capitalizes on this phenomenon, and his cast of talented youngsters taps into this theatricality making their delivery even more operatic and also far more potently disturbing. Peppered within the bleak surroundings—a masterfully handled blend of carnival sideshow and ghost town smack in the centre of America's Bible Belt—the juvenile

cast of *Children of the Corn* embodies the frenzy and dedication as seen in the unsettling impression of the child preacher from yesteryear. Heading the “tribe” is Isaac, the child-cult leader.

After being cast as the enigmatic and considerably creepy Isaac, actor John Franklin studied child preachers who appeared on late night television during the early eighties on cable networks. Franklin explains, “I probably saw some boy preacher on late night TV when I was young, but it was the adult preachers that I observed. Time was limited once I was cast as Isaac, so I watched a few different late night preachers. My memories of boy preachers is that they acted like adults, so I went with a very mature Isaac. He had the respect of adults and kids—I guess a slight combination of all of that, but Isaac just came out of me very naturally. This role was also my first film, so I was determined to kick butt and make the most out of this opportunity. I was raised a Catholic, but our priest only inspired a nap! Isaac seemed to just flow as if he were channelling through my body. I was so nervous during the filming and wanted to be perfect. I was invited to screen a rough cut along with Linda Hamilton and Peter Horton as we might be sent on a press tour. When Isaac looked out the cafe window to begin the massacre, I really freaked out at how creepy and evil a performance I had given. By the end of the movie, Isaac was most pleased.”

Franklin had recently appeared on stage in the Gothic classic *The Innocents* (based on Henry James' novel *The Turn of the Screw*), so his connection to playing sinister children under the “influence” of moral corruption was nothing new—however, unlike young Miles from that English masterpiece, little Isaac is not possessed, he is in control and preaching a scripture that is a twisted variant of Christianity. Franklin's lengthy monologues and crazed ramblings are an absolute highlight of the film and there is a deep rooted performative investment paid to infamous child preachers that shouted out God's word in many a tent revival across the country. One of the most influential and well-known of these kiddy preachers would be Marjoe Gortner.

Born in 1944, Marjoe Gortner (his given name a hybrid of Mary the Holy Mother and Joseph the earthly Father), was a charismatic and influential sermon spewer starting his career at age four. Lead by his religiously fevered parents, he would wow his captive audience of the faithful with his snappy tongue and masterful handle on language and speech. This diminutive religious instructor would marry couples, christen babies that were nearly the same size as him, lead his congregation into boisterous song, and promise eternal life if his disciples obeyed his strict dogma. This runs in parallel with Stephen King's creation of Isaac in *Children of the Corn* (and of course, John Franklin's performance of the character) in that here is a child reverend determined to

keep his community of followers at his feet and taking orders from such a disciplined order—even if it results in grisly violence.

Marjoe Gortner would eventually evolve into an actor in his adult life, starring in some fantastic genre films such as *Earthquake* (1974), *Food of the Gods* (1976), and *Starcrash* (1978). This vocational transition is most certainly a direct extension of his history as a child preacher; there is the notion of being addicted/attracted to performance. But he wouldn't be the only child preacher to influence *Children of the Corn*'s depiction of pint-sized Bible bashers.

Twelve-year-old Uldine Utley would be another high-profile child preacher, who would find her success under the heavy-handed guidance of the legendary Aimee Semple McPherson. McPherson was a vaudeville superstar and a leading Pentecostal evangelist who was also the founder of the controversial Foursquare Church, and in literary and cinematic terms, she would become the inspiration for the character of the doomed Sister Sharon Falconer in the provocative novel *Elmer Gantry* (1926) which would get an electrifying and frightening film adaptation in 1960 with the character portrayed by actress Jean Simmons, whose performance propels this influential and darkly charismatic woman with an operatic vigour and demented zeal. Much like Rachel (Julie Maddalena) the ceremony leader in charge of human sacrifice in *Children of the Corn*, Utley delivered her frenzied sermon with a heightened and maddening zeal, and she would work herself up to bloodcurdling chants that would rouse the fans of tent revivals across America.

The scene in *Children of the Corn* that highlights Rachel's sermon where she is about to share the blood of the "ageing" Amos (John Philbin) with her congregation is a pivotal sequence that is disturbing and unsettling. The children, all dressed in what would be considered a combination of midwest turn-of-the-century farming and Amish modesty, sit entranced by Rachel's command ("And now the blood of Amos shall be shared"), while the imagery that plasters the walls of the church include a bizarre collage of Christ and a screaming gorilla (evoking commentary on the battle between creationism and evolution), corn dressing the headpiece of Jesus (a creepy take on the invisibility of the Native American Indian and indigenous culture being washed out by Christian ideology), and passages from the Bible smeared in blood. Julie Maddalena remembers: "The art direction really informed everything as well. It was set up with paintings of Christ with corn as hair and blood-stained walls with passages from the Bible and it was completely the kind of place where children just should not go, and here I was conducting this sermon to them. It was incredibly creepy and very disturbing and so much fun. Everything about that scene helped create the mood."

This kind of decorative aesthete would also be popular in the child preacher's place of service—for example, Solomon Burke (a black child preacher who excelled at Gospel singing and incorporated that into his sermons) would have his halls decked out with images of Christ walking with children; tapping into the belief that the messiah is as pure as the babe in the woods. *Children of the Corn* successfully perverts this ethos and distorts religious teaching that promotes the innocence of children as holy—the film inverts this principle and warps it into something sinister, malevolent, selfish, and cruel.

Lee Gambin is a writer and film historian. He is the author of Massacred by Mother Nature: Exploring the Natural Horror Film; We Can Be Who We Are: Movie Musicals From the 1970s; The Howling: Studies in the Horror Film; Nope, Nothing Wrong Here: The Making of Cujo; and Tonight, On A Very Special Episode: When TV Sitcoms Sometimes Got Serious. He also runs Melbourne-based film society Cinemaniacs and lectures on cinema studies.



DANIEL LICHT: AN EAR FOR HORROR

by Guy Adams

Since composer Jeff Alexander and publicly-avuncular murder-mogul Alfred Hitchcock released the 1958 album *Music to Be Murdered By*, many soundtrack composers could have used the title on their business cards. Horror loves a good tune, body counts rely on a healthy score. Where would our soundtrack shelves be without the staccato stab of Bernard Herrmann? The low, ominous cello of John Williams? The psycho-freak choir of Danny Elfman?

Few left a body of work behind like Daniel Licht. Before his untimely death in 2017, he scored vampires (*Children of the Night*, Tony Randel, 1991) werewolves (*Bad Moon*, Eric Red, 1996), lay the foundations for haunted houses (*Amityville: It's About Time*, Tony Randel, 1992 and *Amityville: A New Generation*, John Murlowski, 1993), watched marijuana-mutated ticks go on the rampage (*Ticks*, Tony Randel, 1994), and took us to space with *Pinhead (Hellraiser: Bloodline*, Alan Smithee—né Kevin Yagher—1996). Indeed, he was one of the few composers to be able to hold their head up with panel-pin bristling pride next to Christopher Young, the franchise's original composer.

Licht composed for movies, TV, and video games (including two games of the *Silent Hill* franchise and *Dishonored*) but was probably best known for scoring all eight seasons of Showtime's serial killer show, *Dexter* (2006–2013)—for which he used both medical instruments and human bones as percussion.

Born in Detroit in 1957, Licht started playing clarinet at the age of eight. By twelve he had his head turned by the likes of Hendrix, Cream, Led Zeppelin, and King Crimson and swapped his clarinet for a guitar. He played in a garage band, "because I wasn't any good at football and that was the only [other] way to get girls to like you."¹

Within a couple of years his tastes had widened to classical music and jazz, the latter being well-served on the streets of Detroit. At fourteen, he would sneak out of the house to visit jazz clubs and join in late-night jam sessions. A public

radio station, WDET, also fed his eclectic taste. He would go to sleep listening to everything from John Cage to Sly and the Family Stone.

When he was sixteen, he attended the Berklee School of Music where he "learned how to analyze chords for improvisation as well as how to drink alcohol in bars."² Later enrolling at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts "because I was able to take classes with people like [famed Jazz drummer] Max Roach... [and Pulitzer Prize-winning contemporary classical composer] Lew Spratlan."³

While at Hampshire he became friends with fellow student Christopher Young. They played in a jazz band together and, alongside friends, performed vocal freeform improvisations in the college stairwells.

After college, he travelled extensively, studying music in Japan and Europe. His parents lived in Indonesia and he spent time in both Bali and Java studying gamelan—the traditional ensemble music of the area, composed mainly on percussion instruments such as metallophones and xylophones.

"It's actually a very useful kind of music to know for scoring films," he told video game music website, Vgmonline, in 2015, "because its pattern-based and very ostinato-oriented [ostinato is a repeated musical phrase that's very common in film scoring; think the rolling, suspenseful structure of Hans Zimmer's "Dream is Collapsing" for *Inception*. Hans Zimmer never met an ostinato he didn't like and like and like and...] So sometimes I've even used rhythmic patterns that I've learned in gamelans for a suspense kind of background. It's absolutely an influence in my scoring."⁴

Eventually, Licht returned to live in New York. By day he paid the bills composing music for commercials, at night he played in downtown avant-garde ensembles and art noise punk bands in venues such as the legendary CBGB club.

It was college friend Christopher Young who encouraged Licht into the world of soundtrack composition. Visiting Young in Los Angeles, Licht was struck by Young's studio and the variety of the work he was able to create. He saw a field where he could continue to explore a wide variety of musical styles while also putting food on the table.

Young recommended Licht for director Tony Randel's follow-up to *Hellbound: Hellraiser II*, *Children of the Night*. Starring Karen Black, Peter DeLuise, and Ami Dolenz, *Children of the Night* is a somewhat tongue-in-fang vampire picture, a pair of schoolgirls reanimating a vampire by swimming in an abandoned church crypt. Licht's score evokes Christopher Young's style, particularly in the theme, and you can certainly sense this is the work of someone taking

their first, hesitant steps. It immediately led to a lot more work, however, and Licht's skills began developing accelerando.

The following year saw him compose six soundtracks including *Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice*, the first of his scores written for a theatrical release.

Not having the budget for a full orchestra, he split his available sessions between wind, strings, harp, and piano for the "pretty" stuff and low strings, brass and a choir for the "scary" stuff.

In recent years, it's become common for composers to create demo tracks for the directors to work with during initial editing. Back then much less so, though Licht composed a four-handed piano version of a number of his cues, singing the melody over the top. The extra two hands playing the piano belonged to Marco Beltrami, who worked for Licht occasionally. Beltrami would go on to find considerable fame as a soundtrack composer himself.

The score to *Children of the Corn II* is far richer than that of *Children of the Night*, offering jarring, atonal sounds, choral work, a rather twee love melody, and the lilting earworm that acts as Red Bear's theme. That this is the work of someone who is only months into the industry shows the talent that Licht would continue to bring.

Having started out in horror, Licht predictably found himself pigeonholed. Despite a couple of diverse projects (including *A Girl's Guide To Sex*, cover tagline "It's sex! It's lies! It's a videotape!") most of Licht's work was in horror or thrillers.

While knowing it would do his career good to branch out a little, the subjects were close to his heart. "I've always liked the range of music you can write for horror. Stirring emotional music, light weird washes of sound, pounding aggressive percussion. There is more room for acoustic exploration than other forms. Dark music speaks to me more than light happy music."⁵

1995 saw him return to the fields of Nebraska for *Children Of The Corn III: Urban Harvest*. His theme takes the Carl Orff on cocaine choral chanting featured in the previous movie and ramps it up to a level that would shake the lead free from most church roofs. He would later admit in interviews that his favourite horror movies were the original *Omen* trilogy and you can hear the love in that opening theme. Jerry Goldsmith may have opened the floodgates for demented choirs to signal the satanic but few embrace it with such musicality as Licht.

Of course, transplanting the action from Nebraska to Chicago means the movie's sound has to emulate the urban too and there's little doubt that Licht

was happy to broaden the sound cues he'd established in the previous movie. Combining contemporaneous rhythms with "needle drop" music (songs not initially composed for a score but played as part of the soundtrack) it's a shame that the score for *Children Of The Corn III* wasn't released commercially to stand alongside that of the former movie.

After composing the score to Tom Holland's 1996 Steven King adaptation *Thinner*, he slowly found he was being hired for more varied projects. While 1998 brought TV horror nonsense *Legion of Fire: Killer Ants!*, it also brought *Permanent Midnight*, an adaptation of Jerry Stahl's addiction memoir starring Ben Stiller.

For about ten years he flitted between horror (*Soul Survivors*, 2001), TV sitcoms (*Oliver Beene*, 2003; *Jake in Progress*, 2005), misguided adventure adaptations (Patrick Swayze as Allan Quartermain in 2004's *King Solomon's Mines*), and even bizarre Christmas movies (*Off Season*, 2001). Licht's output was as diverse as his musical tastes.

Then came the saga of psychotic blood-spatter analyst, Dexter Morgan. While the theme was composed by English composer Rolfe Kent, Licht's background as a guitarist and his love of world music fit the tonal brief of the Miami-set show and the producers' desire to have a Latin feel to the show's soundtrack.

Licht's music is haunting, eerie, and frequently beautiful.

"The show has a little ironic twist to it. Parts of it are just very dark comedy. I tried to create the feeling of Michael C. Hall as Dexter floating through this dark reality. It is like a slow-motion eerie carnival sound."⁶

While many would find the challenge of keeping the music fresh for the eight years the show initially ran more than they could stand, *Dexter* gave Licht the scope and canvas he wanted and deserved.

The show's "Blood Theme" became the defining track of Licht's score. It was a theme he kept altering and, with every new season bringing new characters and new threats, they would also bring new sounds.

"It's always good to think of something different. To try and think of a new way to approach something. Different instruments, ones that haven't been used a whole lot for specific genres. So if I got a horror film and I decided to feature bassoon, that would be kind of interesting—so maybe the listener is thinking, wow, a bassoon for horror music! For *Dexter*, I was trying to capture some of the humorous elements in it. So what I did was started to use some of the typical comedy instruments, but in a gothic way. So that was a kind of lighter part of *Dexter*. That's where a lot of plucky stuff came from."⁷





His *Dexter* score also became famous for the use of unconventional objects to increase the show's pallet of sounds. "I've always been interested in trying to bend the kind of sounds something can make. Playing instruments in different ways, with different kitchen utensils, even! I used to take my guitar, put it on my lap and bang it with a frying pan."⁸

The success of *Dexter* offered Licht further opportunities for live performance and with it, the chance to showcase unconventional music making methods.

"One of the things I do at the concerts is emphasize different techniques of playing instruments, because it tends to involve the audience a little more. They start to get curious about it. A lot of people put on film music concerts and show film... I don't like doing that because I think the audience stops listening and they start looking. When I do my live concerts... I want to make the audience think a little bit about how the music is made, and I want to incorporate new techniques. So [in a concert in Krakow, Poland] I was playing a meat cleaver and a knife—and then other people were playing scissors and saws and duct tape." Add plenty of plastic sheeting and you have the perfect tools for a night out with *Dexter*.

Daniel Licht, only sixty years old, died of a sarcoma in 2017. Like all artists he leaves ghosts behind, unearthly clatters, wailing vibraphones, and the garotte-taut plucking of mandolins. Sounds to be murdered by.

Guy Adams is a novelist, scriptwriter, and all round lover of film. He writes movies, writes about movies, and reviews movies.

^{1,8} "Interview: Daniel Licht, Composer of *Dexter*." *Movie Mom*, 2014, moviemom.com/interview-daniel-licht-composer-of-dexter.

^{2,3} "Interview with Daniel Licht." *8Dio*, 2017, 8dio.com/2017/08/02/interview-with-daniel-licht.

^{4,7,9} "Dan Licht Interview: A Darker Kind of Score." *vgmonline.net*, 2015, <http://www.vgmonline.net/danlichtinterview>.

⁵ "Composer Daniel Licht Talks *Silent Hill: Downpour*, *Dexter*, and More." *Dread Central*, 2011, <https://www.dreadcentral.com/news/23429/composer-daniel-licht-talks-silent-hill-downpour-dexter-and-more>.

⁶ "Interview with Daniel Licht." *Media Mikes*, 2011, <https://mediamikes.com/2011/03/interview-with-daniel-licht>.

ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

Children of the Corn is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound and was exclusively restored in 4K by Arrow Films for this release.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution at EFilm/ Company 3, Burbank. The film was restored in 4K resolution and graded in SDR at R3store Studios, London. For the 4K UHD, the film was graded in HDR/ Dolby Vision at Silver Salt Restoration, London. The original English language 4-track stereo mix was transferred from the original Dolby mag reels and was remastered to 5.1 by Lakeshore at Deluxe Audio Services, Burbank.

All original film and sound elements for *Children of the Corn* were made available for this restoration by Lakeshore Entertainment

Restoration Supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

R3Store Studios: **Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Rich Watson / R3store Studios**

Silver Salt Restoration: **Anthony Badger, Mark Bonnici, Stephen Bearman**

EFilm/Company 3: **Sean Casey, David Morales / EFilm**

Deluxe Audio: **Jordan Perry / Deluxe Audio**

Lakeshore Entertainment: **Mike Lechner**

Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice and *Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest* are presented in 1.85:1 with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound. The HD masters were supplied by Lakeshore Entertainment.

For the additional material in the alternate cuts of *Children of the Corn II & III*, HD or 35mm film elements sadly could not be located, so SD masters featuring the footage were sourced instead. The SD footage was upscaled by Fidelity in Motion and edited back into the HD masters by Arrow Films. The utmost care and attention has been taken to ensure as seamless a visual presentation as possible, given the inherent limitations of the sources available.

Additional conform work by **James Flower, Arrow Films**.