

# Dealing with the Uncanny? Cultural Adaptation in Matt Reeves's Vampire Movie *Let Me In*

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this article is to examine cultural adaptation and uncanny potential in Matt Reeves's vampire movie Let Me In (2010), which is an adaptation of John Ajvide Lindqvist's vampire novel Låt den rätte komma in (2004) – in English translation, Let the Right One In (2007) – and the Swedish film adaptation (2008), for which Lindqvist wrote the screenplay. The article draws on Linda Hutcheon's theoretical account of “transculturating” and “transcultural adaptations” as well as on different discussions of the uncanny. My analysis establishes that both films evoke the uncanny by introducing horror into the familiar and ordinary as represented by the geographical setting; however, it also shows that there are significant ideological differences between the American film and the Swedish film and novel concerning gender and sexuality, particularly related to the two central figures of the boy and the vampire, but also in relationships that can be regarded as part of the general social and cultural setting. In short, gender-bending and sexual ambiguities, in addition to the uncanny aspects of the human protagonist, are omitted in the American version. In these respects, Reeves's adaptation is less complex, less uncanny, and much more ideologically conservative than the Swedish versions.*

**Keywords:** *Matt Reeves – Let Me In – John Ajvide Lindqvist – Let the Right One In – cultural adaptation – the uncanny – horror film – vampire fiction*

That tells you something about the modernity of the place, its rationality.  
It tells you something of how free they were from the ghosts  
of history and of terror.  
It explains in part how unprepared they were.

– John Ajvide Lindqvist, *Let the Right One In*

The figure of the vampire is a peculiarly transnational phenomenon as it moves, sometimes with supernatural speed, between different countries, parts of the world, and media. It is however mediated differently in different cultural contexts. One intriguing recent example is the Swedish and American film adaptations of John Ajvide Lindqvist's bestselling Swedish novel *Låt den rätte komma in* (2004). This novel features a bullied twelve-year-old boy, who lives with his divorced mother in an apartment complex and whose life changes when he befriends a vampire child who, together with an adult human helper, moves in next door. The Swedish film adaptation of the novel, with the screenplay written by Lindqvist, was directed by Tomas Alfredson and first screened in 2008; it reached an international as well as national audience to great acclaim.<sup>1</sup> The year before, Lindqvist's novel had already appeared in English translation as *Let the Right One In* (2007). In 2010, Matt Reeves's American film adaptation, or remake, was released under the title *Let Me In*. In commonsensical terms, it is not easy to determine whether the American film, for which Reeves wrote the screenplay, should be regarded as an adaptation of the novel or a remake of the Swedish film.<sup>2</sup> There are scenes in the American film that are direct "quotations" from the Swedish film, and Reeves mentions the Swedish screenplay as well as the novel in the credits of *Let Me In*. However, Reeves and Lindqvist seem to agree that *Let Me In* is an adaptation (Reeves; Karlsson). My aim here is not to settle the question whether the American film is an adaptation or a remake once and for all, nor is it necessary to do so. As Linda Hutcheon points out, "Remakes are invariably adaptations because of changes in context" (170), and it is the cultural adaptation in Reeve's film of aspects of the novel and the Swedish film that is the focus of this article.

In my analysis of *Let Me In*, which to date has attracted sparse critical commentary (Gelder 38-41; Siegel), I will draw on Hutcheon's discussion on "transculturating" and "transcultural adaptations" in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). Hutcheon observes, "[a]n adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context – a time and a place, a society and a culture" (142). She also suggests that, "[a]lmost always, there is an accompanying shift in the political valence from the adapted text to the 'transculturated'

1 The Swedish film has won 55 film awards, five of which are Swedish ("Guldbagge"). For most of these awards the film itself or director Tomas Alfredson was the recipient.

2 For a discussion of recent Hollywood remakes in the horror genre, see Steffen Hantke's introduction to *American Horror Film* (2010), vii-xii.

adaptation” (Hutcheon 145). The time of the two film adaptations is similar both in terms of context (2008, 2010) and setting (early 1980s), but the place differs: Reeves’s American Hollywood film is set in Los Alamos in the USA instead of in Swedish Blackeberg, a Stockholm suburb, which is the setting of both the Swedish film and the novel. Both films are categorized as horror films and include a number of scenes of graphic horror, such as a woman spectacularly burning to death in a hospital bed and body parts, newly ripped apart, sinking down in a swimming pool. However, what will concern me here, in the comparison of certain other aspects of the American adaptation with their equivalents in the Swedish adaptation and/or the novel, is the subtler uncanny potential of these aspects,<sup>3</sup> which, at least partly, are connected to ideological issues. In this article, then, I will argue that there are significant ideological differences – shifts in the “political valence” – between the American film and the Swedish film and novel. These differences concern gender and sexuality, particularly related to the two central figures of the boy and the vampire, but also in relationships that can be regarded as part of the general social and cultural setting. These differences, I will suggest, have an impact on the (potentially) uncanny effects of these two horror films.

To my knowledge, there is no criticism dealing with the transcultural adaptation of uncanny elements in these films, nor in any other horror films.<sup>4</sup> As Barbara Creed has argued, though, “[t]he cinema, particularly the horror film, offers a particularly rich medium for an analysis of contemporary representations of the uncanny” (6), which further motivates an investigation into these aspects of Reeves’s film using a transcultural adaptation approach. The uncanny is a slippery concept; it has to do with uncertainty and the unsettling of boundaries – between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between the animate and the inanimate, between stable gender and sexual categories, and so on. Indeed, the vampire is often an uncanny figure, unsettling the boundary not only between life and death but also between human and nonhuman. The uncanny is generally regarded as an effect of the

3 To be uncanny, S. S. Prawer points out in *Caligari’s Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (1980), “a work need not provide shocks of horror” (111). More recently, Barbara Creed has observed that Freud’s “forms of the uncanny describe the metamorphosis of the familiar into the unfamiliar, of bringing to light what should have remained hidden, of the dissolution of boundaries between the real and imagined – and all are mainstays of the horror film” (7).

4 For five articles on horror cinema and transcultural adaptation, see Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy’s *Monstrous Adaptations* (2007).

secularization and rationality of the Enlightenment and modernity; it is the return of repressed irrational and supernatural residue, often in gothic form (Castle; Royle 8). For further clarifications of the uncanny in my discussion below, I will draw on Freud's seminal essay "The 'Uncanny' (1919)" and on central works on the uncanny by Terry Castle and Nicholas Royle.

The geographical setting is essential to the uncanny atmosphere and horror of the novel and the two films. In Freud's definition "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 220), and "it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity, that they may challenge all rationality and logic" (Bennett and Royle 37). In Lindqvist's novel, the rational and well-organized place appears to be a precondition for the free play of horror (Wijkmark 9), which the epigraph to this article indicates. Examining the Swedish film, Rochelle Wright remarks, "The setting is recognizably Blackeberg in the 1980s, to a Swedish audience both familiar and mundane" (58). In *Let Me In*, as well as in the Swedish novel and film, the horror hinges on the ordinariness and familiarity of the surroundings. It is in capturing this uncanny familiarity we can see the motivation for setting the story in American Los Alamos instead of Swedish Blackeberg in the American film; more generally, as Hutcheon puts it, "[i]n the name of relevance, adapters seek the 'right' resetting or recontextualizing" in their transcultural adaptation work (Hutcheon 146). In the American movie, everyday ordinariness is also emphasized in the centrality of cars, which here serve as the hunting ground for the vampire's human helper, whereas the Swedish counterpart uses public transport and finds his victims on foot in a forest area and in the locker room of a public swimming pool. There is an obvious ideological difference in the societies depicted: the individualist American society where car ownership is central, and the more communally oriented Swedish society of the early 1980s, although both movies provide an uncanny atmosphere by introducing the unfamiliar in the shape of the vampire child and the murderous helper in a familiar setting.

Blackeberg and Los Alamos also have in common that they were built by Stockholm City and the US government, respectively, in the mid-twentieth century. Finished in 1952, Blackeberg anticipates the Million Program ("miljonprogrammet") that the Swedish government implemented 1965-1974, whose goal was to provide affordable modern housing, often in the form of apartment buildings, for an increasingly urban Swedish population. At the beginning of his novel, Lindqvist describes the suburb Blackeberg

as history-less, rational, and modern, and the rest of the novel can be read as a meditation on the shortcomings of this image of rationality and modernity: the image of the Swedish Welfare State.<sup>5</sup> Los Alamos, New Mexico, is intimately tied to rationality through science: the town was more or less created by the US government in 1942 for the Los Alamos National Laboratory, home of the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb during World War II, and it is still an important site of science related to nuclear warfare and national security issues. Anthropologist Joseph Masco maintains that “[f]or over half a century now, the psychosocial spaces of American modernity have been shaped by the most prominent legacies of Los Alamos: a utopian belief in the possibility of an unending technological progress, and an everyday life structured around the technological infrastructures of human extinction” (Masco 1). Los Alamos as setting, then, stands for the kind of scientific rationality – with a deadly twist – that, according to Castle among others, has produced the uncanny ever since the eighteenth century. Because of the secrecy involved in the research and development geared towards warfare during and after World War II, Los Alamos moreover represents the other side of “heimlich” that Freud traces in his discussion about the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*): “what is concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud 224-25), as opposed to “heimlich” in the sense of what is familiar or homelike. John Beck, examining novels set in Los Alamos, suggests that this place “has come to represent the concealment of power in its most deadly military form, a power folded into the deep time of the Southwestern landscape” (103). In his book on the Manhattan Project in post-Cold War New Mexico, Masco actually uses the phrase “nuclear uncanny” to describe “the material effects, psychic tensions, and sensory confusion produced by nuclear weapons and radioactive materials” (28). That Reeves’s film is set in Los Alamos carries uncanny potential in this national, historical context.

Development of nuclear armaments is of course very much a part of the Cold War era, aspects of which are highlighted both in the Swedish novel and in the American film, but differently, in ways that emphasizes national contexts and transcultural adaptation. The chapter headings of the novel

5 Apart from vampirism, murder and bullying, problems depicted in Lindqvist’s novel are theft, fencing, shoplifting, glue sniffing, and alcoholism. In the novel and the Swedish film, a few socially marginal characters play important parts in the plot. These characters are nowhere to be seen in the American film, which only depicts middle-class characters.

are specific temporal designations: the heading of the first chapter – after a prologue that establishes “The Location/Blackeberg” – is “Wednesday 21 October 1981” and that of the last is “Epilogue/Friday 13 November” (Lindqvist, *Let the Right* 7, 517). In the context of the Cold War, the two chapters set on 28 and 29 October include reactions to an incident when a Russian submarine stranded in the southern Swedish archipelago on 27 October in 1981. In the first of these two chapters the twelve-year-old protagonist, Oskar, discusses the American neutron bomb with one of his classmates and ends up playing war games in a sand box. He also walks over to the shelter room in the basement of the apartment building where he lives and muses: “If the Russians were coming it would have to be unlocked” (Lindqvist, *Let the Right* 107). In the chapter dated 29 October, one of the socially marginal characters who usually gather at the Chinese restaurant in Blackeberg brings up the topic of nuclear shelters in connection with the Russian submarine and a possible “full-scale invasion” (Lindqvist, *Let the Right* 122). He is invited by one of the others to use their shelter: “Gasmasks, canned food, ping pong table, the whole deal. It’s all there” (Lindqvist, *Let the Right* 123). It is then suggested that, when the Russians land, the conflict could be determined by the generals meeting each other in a ping pong match:

“Do the Russians even know how to play table tennis?”

“Nope. So we got this thing all sewn up. Maybe we’ll even regain control of the Baltic territories.” (Lindqvist, *Let the Right* 123)

Joke apart, the ping pong table in the shelter brings back memories of Sweden in the 1970s and early 1980s to Swedish readers, especially to those of us who grew up then with Cold War instructions films at school as well as table-tennis matches in the shelter, as surely as do the references to submarine violations of Swedish territorial waters.

*Let Me In* begins with the place and the time spelled out on the screen: “Los Alamos, New Mexico/March, 1983.”<sup>6</sup> Within the first eight minutes of the film, which are mostly set in a hospital, the importance of this particular temporal setting in terms of American Cold War politics and rhetoric is es-

6 The year 1982 is very briefly visible in the Swedish film, when Oskar works on cutting out gruesome newspaper articles. This short glimpse confirms that it is the early 1980s in general that is the temporal setting of this film, and not a particular delimited period linked to specific political events.

established: on the TV set in the hospital reception, President Ronald Reagan is giving his address to the National Association of Evangelicals, which he did on 8 March in 1983. This address is also known as his “Evil Empire Speech,” since towards the end of it Reagan cautions his audience not “to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, [not] to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil” (par. 48). However, this part of the speech is neither shown nor heard in *Let Me In*, an omission that, I would suggest, serves to place evil squarely in a national, domestic framework rather than as an external threat to the US in the form of the Soviet Union.

Instead, two *other* parts of Reagan’s speech conclude the introductory section of the American film, which then moves two weeks back in time and finally introduces its twelve-year-old protagonist, Owen (Kodi Smit-McPhee). Interestingly, the two parts, which are actually far apart in Reagan’s address, are not only cut together but are cut in reversed order in *Let Me In*, which zooms in on the TV set showing Reagan’s face as he gives these parts of his speech:

There is sin and evil in the world, and we’re enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might. Our nation, too, has a legacy of evil with which it must deal. The glory of this land has been its capacity for transcending the moral evils of our past. (par. 33)

And finally, that shrewdest of all observers of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, put it eloquently, after he had gone on a search for the secret of America’s greatness and genius—and he said: “Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the greatness and the genius of America. America is good. And if America ever ceases to be good ...” (par. 10)

The end of the quotation from Tocqueville is ominously cut off in the movie,<sup>7</sup> and the text “Two weeks earlier” appears on the screen. Apart from establishing and emphasizing the temporal and political setting, the two fragments from Reagan’s speech, which are presented as a piece of coherent running text, highlight the theme of good versus evil in an American context, and in order to keep the tension in the film it does of course make

7 The quotation ends “..., America will cease to be great.” In *Let Me In* it is good vs. evil that is highlighted rather goodness being a requirement for national greatness.

sense to end on an inconclusive note of speculation on what would happen “if America ever ceases to be good” instead of on Reagan’s celebration of America’s ability to transcend moral evil.

The greater focus in the American adaptation on framing what is frightening in religious terms may actually serve to make the film less uncanny than its Swedish counterpart. In terms of transcultural adaptation, the introduction of religion and good versus evil in the American film has both historical and ideological resonances, as Christianity and politics have often openly been intertwined in the US (despite the first amendment), which Reagan and his speech exemplify. The uncanny, however, arises with secularization: “It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural” (Royle 1). As Royle puts it, “With a belief in God or some ‘evil Will’ or a variety of divine ‘Beings’, the uncanny does not even rear its eerie head” (20). In case the viewer of *Let Me In* should have missed that evil is one of the themes that Reeves especially wants to highlight, Owen calls his father and tries to talk to him about evil. Owen makes this phone call fairly late in the film, after having discovered that his new, beloved friend Abby (Chloë Grace Moretz) is a vampire. His divorced dad does not, however, find evil a suitable topic of conversation and blames Owen’s mother for instilling religious, superstitious notions in her son. To a certain extent, then, Owen’s father is the voice of secular rationality in *Let Me In*: disembodied, distant, and utterly unprepared to deal with or even acknowledge the return of the repressed.

As critics have observed, the adults in the novel and the Swedish film are also inadequate, which marks Oskar’s development as well as his situation. As Wright puts it, in the Swedish film, “Oscar [sic] is failed by the adults in his life, who are too preoccupied to notice the cruel, incessant bullying he undergoes at school, let alone his unhealthy preoccupation with random acts of violence or his solitary enactment of revenge scenarios” (58). In regard to Lindqvist’s novel, Kevin Corstorphine points out that whereas the bullying of Oskar leads the reader to empathize with him “the nihilistic tone [of the novel] is more than a little troubling from a moral perspective,” and while Oskar manages to build his self-confidence “through his association with Eli,” he does it by “becoming more monstrous than his enemies” (85). John Calhoun has commented on the role of adults in the Swedish film and how their shortcomings affect both Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant) and Eli (Lina Leandersson), as the vampire child is called in this film as well as in the novel:



The adults in *Let the Right One In* are useless or worse, and that includes Håkan, the middle-aged man who lives with Eli and who is charged with hunting down her prey. . . . Yet Håkan is a poor provider and fails as definitely as the . . . film's other adults to offer a stable haven. Eli, like Oskar, must fend for herself. And here we see how adult failure produces not just childish victims, but monsters. (Calhoun 28)

The uncanny ambiguity of the child who is both a victim and a monster is introduced at the very beginning of the Swedish film, which shows an almost naked and thus vulnerable Oskar in front of a window,<sup>8</sup> holding a Swedish hunting knife, threatening his mirror image in the window, mimicking the boys who bully him at school. Thus, the viewer is immediately confronted with the protagonist as both vulnerable and potentially dangerous: a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but a child.

In contrast, the opening of the American film does not introduce Owen, but three father figures: the vampire child Abby's unnamed male adult helper (the equivalent to Håkan in the Swedish film and the novel), a male police officer, and President Ronald Reagan. In a 2010 interview with Peter Hall, while asserting that Owen's perspective is of utmost importance, Reeves is nevertheless quite voluble speaking about two adult minor characters: the police officer (Elias Koteles) and the helper (Richard Jenkins). For Reeves, the figure of the police officer serves both as a threat to Owen and Abby's relationship and as a kind of moral, compassionate compass for the viewer. Reeves also makes a comment related to transcultural adaptation: "In an American story, you couldn't really have these murders taking place in a town and not have there be a reaction without the police getting involved," but then he swiftly adds, "It's in the book." This short reference to Lindqvist's novel makes Reeves's statement about the police being particularly important for an *American* story about murders somewhat peculiar in the sense that the police do indeed play an important part in the novel and Reeve's film is allegedly an adaptation of that novel.

It is, however, true that there is a stronger focus on the police in the American film than in the Swedish adaptation, which may also be related to a greater visibility of the police force in American films in general compared to Swedish ones. Hall and Reeves, moreover, agree that it is easy to sympathize and even identify with the character played by Jenkins – Abby's helper – who they both refer to as "the father." Reeves explains how the

8 For an interesting article on *Let the Right One In* and adaptation that focuses on the motif of the window in the Swedish film and the novel, see Jorgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Henriette Thune.

choice of actor and the use of cinematic techniques and plot development help the viewer to “empathize with someone who is essentially a serial killer” and lend him a “tragic dimension.” Although there is indeed a sense of failure and impending doom in connection with these two characters, and despite Reeves’s assertions in the same interview about the importance of successfully representing a twelve-year-old’s point of view, I would argue that the opening of *Let Me In* with its three father figures effectively serves to contain the child protagonist in a patriarchal adult framework that regardless of its inefficiency takes away at least some of the protagonist’s uncanny potential.

Reeves’s way of highlighting, yet further containing, Owen’s point of view is to show him as an observer early in the film, so when finally a lightly clad Owen is introduced in his room, he is spying on his neighbors through a telescope, and he is wearing a mask when he threatens his mirror image with a kitchen knife. The perspective is unambiguously from within the room, unlike in the Swedish film. Instead, in *Let the Right One In*, we first see Oskar reflected in the lighted window, which effectively underscores his vulnerability, since he is exposed and highly visible to anybody looking up at the window. For the viewer, he is an object of scrutiny rather than an observer. To a certain extent, then, the uncanny, ambiguous aspects of the child protagonist are toned down in the American film.

In addition to the patriarchal framing indicated above, there are even more obvious differences between the American adaptation and the Swedish film, as well as between the American adaptation and the novel, in matters of gender and sexuality,<sup>9</sup> which are matters that frequently lend themselves to uncanny effects. As Royle points out, “The uncanny is a crisis of the proper ...” (1), and propriety often hinges on norms and restrictions pertaining to gender and sexuality. Hutcheon suggests that “[t]ranscultural adaptations often mean changes in ... gender politics. Sometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial” (147). This, I would argue,

9 Carol Siegel also argues that “[s]exuality, as well as gender, is differently represented in the American film version” than in the Swedish film and the novel (555). However, other than that, our conclusions about the details of sexuality and gender in the two films and the novel differ as she reads *Let Me In* in terms of American notions of gender complementarity, companionate marriage, and the possibility of romantic heterosexual love against what she sees as the Swedish versions’ propounding of failed domesticity and the impossibility of heterosexual love and happy marriages.

is definitely the case *Let Me In*, which is remarkably timid and, in some ways, even outright conservative in regard to issues of gender and sexuality, which makes it less uncanny than the Swedish movie.

Owen's parents, like Oskar's in the Swedish film, which here closely follows the novel, are divorced, and Owen, like Oskar, lives with his mother. There are some significant gender differences in this scenario, though. Oskar pays a weekend visit to his father, and the viewer learns about at least one of the reasons for the divorce: while the two of them are playing tic-tac-toe, a drinking buddy appears and everything centers on the bottle that the father brings out of the cabinet. The relationship of Oskar's father and his drinking buddy is depicted as homosocial in the Swedish film,<sup>10</sup> and the emotional intimacy between male drinking buddies is also very obvious in the relationship of two of the socially marginal characters in the group frequenting the Chinese restaurant. In the American film, Owen's father is, as mentioned, only present in the form of telephone calls, but it is clear that he has managed to establish a new heterosexual relationship and that it is Owen's mother and not the father who may have a drinking problem. Moreover, the father's allegation that she is overly religious appears to be justified. Early in the film, Owen's single mother says prayers at the dinner table and brings her wine glass to the telephone when it rings. We also hear a TV preacher in the background when she is at home. So, Owen's mother is not only a representative of useless adults in general; she is a *single mother*, a figure that has often served as a scapegoat for all kinds of ills befalling children in American society and culture.

This view of the single mother was prevalent in the era of Reagan's family politics, which is reflected in vampire films from the 1980s. *The Lost Boys*, a vampire movie from 1987, features a disastrously inadequate single mother who not only fails to realize that she needs to protect her sons against vampires, but also unwittingly dates the master vampire. The same year, in the vampire film *Near Dark*, a single father saves both his son and

10 Ken Gelder suggests that Oskar's father may have a homosexual relationship with his male friend and that they actually live together: "As for Oskar's father, he has long since departed, his house in rural Sweden cohabited by another unidentified male companion ('We have a guest') whose presence – is his father gay? – effectively drives Oskar back to Blackeberg and his more accommodating vampire neighbour" (38). Although Gelder is wrong about the cohabiting – the father's comment about having a guest is directed to Oskar, who is upset about the drinking buddy's intrusion, which interrupts his and his father's game of tic-tac-toe – Gelder's interpretation of the scene highlights the affective strength of the representation of this relationship in the Swedish film.

his son's girlfriend from vampirism. In line with the governing mindset of the American 1980s, then, in *Let Me In*, we may suspect that it is Owen's mother, and not his father, who should be blamed for the divorce, which apparently has put Owen in a more vulnerable position than ever before.

Another important change in the American film is the exclusion of the emotional intimacy between adult male characters that are part of the Swedish film and the novel and the references to homosexuality in the novel. There is no sign of homosocial bonding and love between male drinking buddies in the American film, nor is there any sign of the discussion about homosexual love that Oskar has with a female teacher in the novel. Instead heterosexuality plays a much larger part in the American *Let Me In*: Owen's father has a new heterosexual relationship, Owen is spying on his heterosexual neighbors' love lives, and he and his classmates read *Romeo and Juliet* and watch Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptation of the play in school. As Ken Gelder argues, in the American film, the citations from *Romeo and Juliet* "work to stabilise the heterosexuality" of Owen and Abby's "awkwardly tender affair" (39).

Indeed, *Let Me In* presents a society where heterosexuality is all-encompassing; it may very well be a portrayal of the social attitude in the US in the 1980s, but nothing in the film challenges this picture. The sexism of this heterosexist society is expressed in the homosocial bullying of Owen by boys at his school: the bullies call him a "little girl." In the Swedish film and the novel, in contrast, Oskar is called "Piggy" or "Little Pig," and he is repeatedly told by his bullies that he has to "squeal like a pig" in order for them to let him go.<sup>11</sup> Whereas their calling him a pig calls his humanity and personhood into question, policing gender and sexual boundaries is not a part of the Swedish bullies' humiliation of Oskar.

One of the more remarkable changes in the American film, though, is the adaptation of the vampire child to this society's all-prevailing heterosexuality, which severely reduces this figure's uncanny potential. To begin with, the vampire's name is changed to Abby, which is unmistakably the name of a girl (Abigail), whereas in Sweden Eli is not a gendered name.

11 "Piggy" may be an allusion to the character by that name in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954). In Golding's novel the boy called Piggy is killed by a mob of schoolboys on an uninhabited island. This scenario certainly resonates with Oskar's tribulations. The line "Squeal like a pig" also resonates with John Boorman's 1972 film *Deliverance* and the scene in which one of the male protagonists is brutally raped by a backwoodsman after having been told to get down on hands and knees and "Squeal like a pig." This possible allusion to homosexual rape further complicates the depiction of sexuality in the Swedish novel and film.

Here it is significant that one important form of the uncanny is a “sense of radical uncertainty about sexual identity – about whether a person is male or female, or apparently one but actually the other” (Bennett and Royle 38). Writing about the Swedish film, Calhoun brings up an ambiguous interchange between Oskar and Eli: “When she tells Oskar she’s not a girl, does she simply mean that she’s not a *human* girl? A clue is provided in one startling shot of Eli’s nude body that reveals neither male nor female genitals, but a scar where presumably something else once was” (Calhoun 31). In the novel, Eli’s past is revealed; he was a boy named Elias when his penis was cut off at the time he was turned into a vampire. After Oskar makes this discovery in the novel the pronouns referring to Eli change from “she” and “her” to “he” and “his,” and in the Swedish film as well as in the novel Oskar has to cope not only with the fact that Eli is a vampire, but also that Eli, whom he loves, is not and has never been female.

The American film has kept the scene where the vampire Abby tells Owen that she is not a girl, but here it simply means that she is not a human girl. There seems to be little doubt that Abby is female. In 2009, Calhoun expressed an interest in whether the “projected American remake of *Let the Right One In*,” that is, Reeves’s *Let Me In*, would show “Eli’s disfigured groin” (31). Where the Swedish film shows Eli’s scarred groin, the American film shows Owen peeping at Abby when she puts a dress on. Based on his reaction, he does not see anything as startling as what Oskar sees. As Calhoun points out, “Defined notions of gender and sexual identity are challenged by the [Swedish] film, as are taboos regarding physical intimacy between children” (31). Reeves’s *Let Me In* retains the scene in which the vampire child enters through the human protagonist’s window, undresses, and slips under the cover next to him, but the American film cannot be said to challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality. The American adaptation also takes away any possibility of uncanny effects based on radical uncertainty about sexual identity.

Lindqvist’s novel deals with an additional sexual taboo involving children: pedophilia. Indeed, as anthropologist Heather Montgomery observes, “Child sex has become, for the vast majority of westerners, the final taboo” (327). In *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, James Kincaid maintains that stories about child molesting are among contemporary Western culture’s most horrifying – and pervasive. These ubiquitous socio-cultural narratives are paradoxical: children are increasingly sexualized or eroticized at the same time as adults’ erotic responses to children are not

only seen as criminal, but unimaginable (Kincaid 21). The emergence of the vampire child in fiction in the three decades between 1975 and 2005 coincided with and appears to be intimately related to contemporary social and cultural discourses on child sexual abuse.<sup>12</sup>

Lindqvist's novel is a prime example of the intersection between the vampire child and these socio-cultural narratives; Eli's adult helper Håkan is a pedophile, and the reader of the novel is actually confronted with his thoughts, feelings, and motivations. To him it is important that Eli is a boy and not a girl since his pedophilic leanings are exclusively directed towards boys, and twelve-year-old boys are the ones to whom he is most attracted. In the course of the novel, Håkan develops from a fastidious and aesthetically minded peeping Tom and clumsy, reluctant provider of blood for Eli to the epitome of the pedophile as ruthless predator, governed exclusively by his cravings: a brain-dead monster with a constant erection, who finally corners and brutally assaults Eli. As Jorgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelvik, and Henriette Thune point out, "the [Swedish] film feels a lot less like a horror film than the book feels like a horror *novel* ... first and foremost because the plotline related to the paedophile Håkan, and in particular to his 'afterlife' as an undead, is not part of the film" (4).

Neither of the two film adaptations stays faithful to the novel in the portrayal of the vampire's adult helper. In the novel, Håkan Bengtsson is an ex-literature teacher who Eli picks up after Håkan has lost his job due to his predilection for child pornography, but in the Swedish film, the character's back story and his and Eli's relationship are not explained. Pedophilia is one possibility, but it is not spelled out, which means that Håkan is a more ambiguous figure in the Swedish film than in the novel. In his foreword to *Låt de gamla drömmarna dö* [Let the old dreams die], John Ajvide Lindqvist discusses another possibility, which he did not consider until he saw the Swedish film for the first time at the Gothenburg Film Festival in 2008. Despite having written the screenplay himself, it was not until then he realized that the ending could imply that Oskar will become another Håkan (Lindqvist, *Låt de gamla* 11). The American *Let Me In*, as Lindqvist also observes (12), makes this possibility an unambiguous certainty.<sup>13</sup> In

12 There are vampire children in Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* (1975) and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), as well as intimations of pedophilia.

13 Lindqvist sees this ending as a reasonable one, "a fair interpretation of the story and the open ending that I intentionally left open in the novel. But it is not *my* ending" (*Låt de gamla* 12, my translation).

the American film, Owen finds an old photo strip of Abby and a boy with glasses in the apartment where Abby and her helper – the character that Reeves and Hall refer to as “the father” – live, which makes it clear that the adult male character once had the same relationship to Abby as Owen has in the present. The sexual innocence of this relationship is thus transferred to that between Abby and the adult man, which takes away any uncanny suggestions of pedophilia.

In her discussion of transcultural adaptation, Hutcheon mentions two general strategies in Hollywood films: “[f]or Hollywood, ... transculturating usually means Americanizing a work” (Hutcheon 146), but “[b]ecause Hollywood films are increasingly being made for international audiences, the adaptation might end up ... actually deemphasizing any national, regional, or historical specificities” (Hutcheon 147). Although *Let Me In* is made for an international as well as a national audience, Reeves relies on Americanizing the film. As I have shown, both the setting and the characters are Americanized, which makes good sense insofar as the American film, like the Swedish film and novel *Let the Right One In*, introduces horror into, as well as exposes horror in, the familiar and ordinary. In order to achieve this uncanny effect, a specific national 1980s’ setting has to be depicted. Arguably, Reeves’s adaptation is closer to the novel than the Swedish film is in establishing a very particular temporal setting and in explicit references to the Cold War, but in an American instead of in a Swedish context.

However, in the Americanizing of this Hollywood film, Reeves has also chosen to omit or tone down certain uncanny elements and aspects that are present in the Swedish film and/or the novel. In these respects, Reeves’s adaptation is less complex and much more ideologically conservative than the Swedish versions. Thus, gender-bending and sexual ambiguities, in addition to the uncanny aspects of the human protagonist, are omitted in the American version. The American film also carefully avoids any hints of pedophilia in the vampire child’s relationship with her helper, as well as the novel’s graphic horror of the undead Håkan’s sexual rampage. So, while Reeves appears to deem his audience ready to encounter bullying and supernatural evil in what Stephen King has dubbed “the best American horror film in the last 20 years” (Adams), *Let Me In* steers clear of any challenges to conventional notions of gender and sexuality.

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