

The Cinematic Representation of the Wild Child

Michael Brodski

Institute for Film, Theatre and Empirical Cultural Studies at the University of Mainz
(Germany)

Examining Francois Truffaut's *L'Enfant Sauvage* (France, 1970), the wild and feral child Victor (Jean-Pierre Cargol) shall be considered in its cinematic portrayal as an apotheosis of the general fundamental cultural construction of a child. Following the thesis of James R. Kincaid, the figure of the child in this context can be consequently seen as a 'hollow category', seemingly featureless in its alleged innocence. As a result, it therefore functions as a 'repository of cultural needs or fears' of the adult. One of such cultural needs can be particularly defined in relation to the feral child, consisting in using it as a key to examine the very origins of mankind itself: As proclaimed by Stephen Horigan, such discourses build upon the binary distinction of nature and culture leading to the question if certain kinds of abilities and behaviours could be regarded as constitutional or semi-skilled. For this reason, the child, and especially the feral child, can serve as a projection screen for a variety of different and even opposed questions and symbolic constructions. The film subliminally contains this assumption by means of portraying Victor: This is mainly achieved by constantly shifting between a Rousseau-inspired Romantic discourse of the noble savage; for example, by showing the boy sleeping peacefully in a purely natural environment, and the Lockean enlightenment-driven empirical approach of the infant's mere *tabula rasa* condition and the doctor's, Jean Itard (played by Truffaut himself), resulting need to educate Victor. Furthermore, the film's intention to finally modulate the child into an object of adult discourses is additionally also cinematically achieved through a series of developmental framing shots of the boy's facial expressions: Initially starting with rather anxious and uncontrolled antics, they then turn opaque and calm, thereby undermining the boy's self-expression and individuality and therefore supporting the projection possibilities for the adult viewer.

After having recently finished his MA in Film Studies, **Michael Brodski** is currently working on his PhD thesis on the representation of child protagonists in Soviet and Russian cinema at the Institute of Film, Theatre and Empirical Cultural Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. His main research interests include Soviet and Russian cinema and culture, children's film and medial representations of childhood and children's culture as well as cinematic portrayals of remembrance.