CULTURE AND POWER:
MUSIC, MEDIA AND VISUAL ARTS

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CONTENTS

I. CINEMA AND TELEVISION

II. THE WRITTEN PRESS

OUR OWN ALIEN CHILDREN: (MIS)REPRESENTING THE CHILD IN JOHN WYNDHAM'S *THE MIDWICH CUCKOOS*

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Since the 1950s many novels and films have (mis)represented children as moral and/or physical monsters. These disturbing images are even more questionable than those generated by the misrepresentation of women and sexual or ethnic minorities. Whereas adults can denounce and reject negative representations, children are totally defenceless, which begs the question of whether this is, precisely, the reason why they are so often misrepresented as horrific creatures. In, for instance, the sci-fi novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) by the English writer John Wyndham (1903-1969), children are represented as an evil, invading alien race; or, perhaps, the other way round. The Penguin Classics paperback edition of Wyndham's novel, published in 2002, paradoxically signals the canonisation of this well-crafted popular classic at a time when its content appears to be in complete contradiction with the contemporary, neo-Victorian view of children as unprotected victims of physical and psychological abuse. Clearly, these apparently contrary views of childhood - the monstrous and the angelic - are, at heart, mirror images; real children should be placed at some point between them.

The two World Wars contributed significantly to creating new concepts of youth and childhood. The realisation that millions of young men had been needlessly massacred in the trenches to please a military establishment run by their inept elders opened an important generational rift after World War I. The so-called happy 1920s witnessed the beginnings of youth culture, with its short-skirted, short-haired flappers and its frantic dances, while the aftermath of World War II saw the consolidation of youth itself as one of the main values in Western culture. The children of the 1950s, raised in a Cold War climate in which the threat of the bomb dramatically

curtailed their belief in the future, embraced the new idea of instant gratification provided by the new consumerist ethos of late capitalism. Suddenly, British and American adults realised that parental authority was no longer respected, hence the new representations of children and teenagers as dangerous aliens in films and novels, like *The Midwich Cuckoos*.

The fiction that focuses on evil children (or children doing evil) tries to answer essentially two questions: first, what factors may transform children born innocent into evil, monstrous adults?; second, what can parents do when they face the evidence that their children are (doing) evil? Two novels published on both sides of the Atlantic in 1954, the literary classic by William Golding *Lord of the Flies* and the popular novel by William Marsh *The Bad Seed*, made into a successful film by Mervyn LeRoy in 1956, give different, complementary answers. Golding leaves his children alone on a desert island and the result, as is well known, is mayhem, which is meant to prove that "men", for Golding deals specifically with boys, naturally incline towards evil. Marsh portrays, in contrast, an all-American, suburban little girl who closely follows her grandmother's criminal career to the horror of her respectable, helpless mother. Marsh's novel examines the now well-known tenet that adult psychopaths begin their activities in childhood and needn't be the children of dysfunctional families (Ramsland). The "bad seed" of the title refers to the genetic inheritance which makes the girl murderous and that, quite conveniently, skips the DNA of little Rhoda's blameless mother, thus excused for her daughter's inclinations. Parents are also exonerated in the other two main classics of corrupt or evil childhood of the 1950s: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955; films 1962, 1997) and Wyndham's own *Midwich Cuckoos*.

Midwich was made into the film *Village of the Damned* in 1960, the year when Peter Brook filmed *Lord of the Flies*. Stanley Kubrick's film *Lolita* came out in 1962, a year after the best film adaptation of Henry James's seminal "The Turn of the Screw", Jack Clayton's *The Innocents*. By the mid-60s, the image of the dangerous, powerful child somehow split between the golden-eyed satanic baby of Ira Levin's chilly novel *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), popularised by Roman Polanksi's film (1968), and the uncanny, dazzling Alia of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965; film 1984), a six-year-old witch empowered with a superhuman amount of wisdom by a mystic ritual.

Powerful, wise, mutant children like her would resurface in the 1980s, but the 1970s saw, rather, a breed of murderous children of all ages including, amazingly, newly born babies as in the campy film *It's Alive!* (1974) and even

lethal foetuses as in the far more ghastly *The Brood* (1979). 1970s adults also enjoyed distressing images of childhood in *The Other* (1972) from the novel by Tom Tryon about an evil twin, *The Omen* (1976) in which six-year-old Damien "is" the Antichrist, David Lynch's film *Eraserhead* (1977) about a severely malformed baby or *Boys from Brazil* (1978, from another novel by Levin) in which Dr. Mengele clones a batch of young Hitlers from the Führer's DNA. The popular American novel also contributed the poignant images of the six-year-old vampire Claudia in Anne Rice's cult novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976; film 1993) and Regan, the twelve-year-old possessed by the devil in William Peter Blatty's 1971 best-selling novel *The Exorcist* (filmed in 1973).

"The gusto with which films like *The Omen* make the audience wish for the child's destruction", S.S. Prawer wrote, "has something deeply suspect about it - might there be a link, perhaps, between the way in which our more cruel instincts are here being directed against a child, and the disturbing use made of child 'actors' in pornographic films?" (71) In the 1980s, as David Skal notes, the prevalent use of child abuse, child murder and evil children in fiction "paralleled a swelling hysteria in the courts and the media over sexual molestation and incest" (361) which in the 1990s was transformed into the frantic persecution of child pornography, especially in the internet. Skal tentatively attributes the 1980s hysteria to the "baby boomers' shifted resentment of their own children - not to mention their own parents" (362), due to the new difficulties related to child-rising: "guilt over reliance on day care, the inevitable lack of 'quality' time in a two-career family, and the tendency to view children as a kind of middle-class entitlement rather than a financial responsibility". (362)

Since 1977 when Stephen King gave a literal answer in *The Shining* to the question of what could possess a father to ill-treat his own child, novels and films have been tentatively exploring the thorny topic of abuse. This exploration, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to King's work (Martin), is quite problematic not only because it reveals the hidden depths of our questionable behaviour towards children but also because in order to condemn those adults that commit crimes against children authors like King show them in scenes whose violence verges on the pornographic. King, author of the short story about a village run by deadly children which inspired the popular film series *Children of the Corn* (1984-2001), has nonetheless portrayed more abused children sacrificed to the terrors created by adults than little horrors.

Whenever King's children turn out to be monsters - the girls of *Carrie* (1973; film 1976), *Firestarter* (1980; film 1984) or the boy of *Pet Sematary* (1988; film 1989) - they invite pity rather than horror, unlike, for instance, Iain Banks's boy-girl of *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Thomas Disch's killer baby in *The Businessman: A Tale of Horror* (1984) or Doris Lessing's young hooligan Ben in *The Fifth Child* (1988). Orson Scott Card's admired sci-fi novel *Ender's Game* (1985), in which a child is used by the military authorities to practically wipe out an entire alien race, or films like *D.A.R.Y.L.* (also 1985) or *A.I.* (2001), both about boy-robots adopted by families, belong to an expanding paradigm, perhaps started by King's own *Firestarter*. In these stories innocent monstrous children are victimised by sinister power systems, a strategy which is at heart a further attempt at excusing faulty parenting.

The fact that the monstrous child is more often victim than victimiser was, thus, clear enough by the mid 1980s. Yet, Marina Warner still insisted in 1993 that "the Child has never been seen as such a menacing enemy as today. Never before have children been so saturated with all the power of projected monstrousness to excite repulsion - and even terror". (43) Ironically, the eccentric children of the Addams Family (films 1991, 1993) seemed to be the only well-adjusted example in a panorama dominated in the 1990s by the idea that modern overworked, misguided parents ignore everything about their children, whether these are poor innocents harassed by ghosts, as happens in *The Sixth Sense* (1999), or fiends bent on killing younger siblings, as in *The Good Son* (1993). The immense success of *The Sixth Sense* and the failure of *The Good Son* and of John Carpenter's new version of *Midwich Cuckoos*, *Village of the Damned* (1995), suggests that the victimised child is gaining ground. This is also apparent in Robert Rodríguez's film *El Espinazo del Diablo* (2001) which fuses the Dickensian orphan and the monstrous child to preach the now widespread idea that abuse in childhood creates adult abusers.

As reviewers complained, Carpenter's *Village of the Damned* fails because it simply copies Wolf Rilla's 1960 version without taking into account the changes brought about by the passage of time. Significantly, Carpenter, King and most storytellers interested in the theme of the evil child belong to the baby-boom generation that inspired the first portraits of childhood evil. While for them the main issue, as Skal notes, is guilt over their inability to cope with all the demands of modern parenthood, for the generation of Golding, Marsh, Wyndham or Nabokov the main issue was, rather, the alienness of the new, massive generation that took over between the 1950s and

1960s. By ignoring the distance between Rilla's film and his own, Carpenter seems to be silencing the alienness his own generation was charged with; by siding with Rilla and Wyndham, Carpenter renews the generational gap demonising the children of the present as his own generation was demonised in the past. The problem, of course, is that this is no longer an acceptable strategy, if it ever was.

The confusion about the alienness of post-war children is perhaps most apparent in a crucial difference between *Midwich Cuckoos* and Rilla's film adaptation. Near the end of the novel the Children persuade Col. Bernard Westcott, one of the main characters, to negotiate some form of survival on their behalf realising they are about to be wiped out. The Children - collectively referred to in this way - mature physically very quickly and psychologically even faster; by the time they are nine they are psychologically grown-ups, of a distinct unemotional personality, and physically teenagers. Westcott is terribly confused because, "in one startling flash he was hearing an adult, seeing a sixteen-year-old, knowing that it was a nine-year-old who spoke". (169) Curiously, the adapters were also prey to this confusion and supposed that the Children were four but looked nine, totally missing their characterisation as teenagers in the novel. This shows that, at least in Britain, the category of the teenager took years to emerge so that between the 1950s and the early 1960s there was considerable hesitation as to whether adolescents were children or adults, though little doubt as to their alienness.

The platinum blond wigs of Rilla's children and their uniform looks, connoting the application of eugenics, have misled some commentators into reading Wyndham's Children as reborn Nazis ready for a subtle invasion. Others, like David Skal have interpreted this novel as a premonition of the "the creeping sense that women's reproductive functions could be hijacked by futuristic male science" and of the horrors of Thalidomide, the wonder drug that caused the birth of thousands of malformed babies in 1962 (289). *Midwich Cuckoos* however, was written in 1957, not 1947 or 1967, and very clearly refers to other fears closer home. As Andy Sawyer points out in reference to the film, clearly "a number of anxieties unsettling the British public of the 1960s can be discerned [...]: fear of the Cold War, of insidious invasion, of totalitarianism (the Children have no individuality), and of a new generation which may not share the values of the old". (86). This is understating the fears expressed by Wyndham, for the race of alien children whose birth has been

mysteriously forced upon their mothers have come to destroy and supplant the older generations all over the world.

Midwich, narrator Richard Gayford explains, "was, almost notoriously, a place where things did not happen" (5). This quintessential English sleepy hollow falls mysteriously asleep for a whole day, later christened the Dayout, in which all women over 17 including virgins become pregnant. Surely Wyndham knew girls can be fertile as young as 11 but dared not show pregnant children in his novel. An experimental facility run by military intelligence, quite an oddity in the middle of this idyllic pastoral landscape, is immediately blamed but suspicion is soon shifted onto an enigmatic hemispherical white object which lands by the local church (!) but vanishes right after being photographed. Wyndham, however, offers no definitive explanation for the Children's origins.

The comic overtones of the first part of the novel, with chapters called "All quiet in Midwich", "Operation Midwich" or "Well Played, Midwich", should perhaps be attributed to the author's wish to make light of the horrors involved in the initial stages of the story: the massive rape of 70 sleeping women, the fear their abnormal pregnancy elicits and the foetuses' fierce determination not to be aborted. Marianne Kincaid Speller finds Wyndham's treatment of the women's feelings brave enough, maintaining that "it's a remarkable piece of imaginative effort on Wyndham's part" (1998), though it is quite evident that a woman writer would have handled the theme in a straight gothic mood. Angela Zellaby, who turns out to be pregnant in the usual way, plays the role of spokeswoman for her fellow female villagers and for the benefit of the reader. At one point she confesses to her husband, the main character, that the worse is "to know there's something growing there - and not to be sure how, or what... It's so abasing, Gordon. It makes me feel like an animal". (58) Yet, Wyndham does not insist much on this point, making Gordon Zellaby sympathetic but not excessively concerned. Paradoxically, the women handle the whole affair much better than the "cuckolded" men, who only conform because they know that, since the whole village is affected, none of their male peers can laugh at them.

Wyndham clearly wants to lay the main stress on the second part of the book, which deals with the Children's efforts to survive amongst the hostile villagers, who have by then finally wised up to the idea that the Children aim at replacing the human species on Earth. The first part of the novel, which covers the pregnancy and the babies' first two years of life, is interesting above

all as regards the way in which the whole village decides to protect themselves and the Children from the prying eyes of other villages and the media, fearing gossip and public exposure as if they were characters in a novel by Jane Austen. This attitude, dealt with by Wyndham with fine irony, is the clearest manifestation of the novel's self-conscious Englishness. As he calmly dresses a salad, the writer Gordon Zellaby analyses for his guests the impact of H.G. Wells's fictions on both sides of the Atlantic, and concludes that whereas in America none would doubt an announcement of invasion in view of their sci-fi tradition, "over here, one feels, the report of such an invasion would be received in at least some quarters with a tinge of preliminary scepticism, but we must allow the Americans to know their people best". (161) This scepticism is what gives the novel its characteristic tongue-in-cheek tone, at least in the first part.

No doubt, Wyndham was a neo-Darwinian and a follower of Wells's dystopian fiction. "On a cosmic level", Alexandra Aldridge observes, "the neo-Darwinian biologist in Wells fears that evolutionary processes will carry ... adverse conditions forward in time. His imagination is appalled by the wasted lives of masses of people and the likelihood that mankind as a whole might only devolve" (32). Wyndham, in his turn, is appalled by the idea that another species may successfully push mankind out of the evolutionary race, a point he had already made in his best-known novel, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). In it a monstrous vegetal species takes advantage of the universal blindness caused by a meteorite and replaces mankind at the top of creation. What comes as a surprise in *Midwich Cuckoos* is the fact that the Darwinian threat is not posed by abject monsters like these plants but by beautiful children who may be alien but look human, or almost.

The Children's appearance is not so extraordinary, considering as Sabine Büssing does that "the overwhelming majority of children in horror fiction are not just pretty, but endowed with a wonderful beauty" (4), just like the other main category of patriarchal monster, the *femme fatale*. Midwich's Children, it must be noted, are not semi-human hybrids born to the same father; they are, rather, implanted fertilised ova, which means that their mothers have been only used as living incubators. Eventually, 31 males and 30 females are born, all of them endowed with extraordinary golden eyes and silvery, shiny skin; incidentally, they all have dark blond hair not the platinum blond hue of the films. Clinically speaking, they are psychopaths, in the sense that they cannot develop feelings of any kind towards other persons. They can

mentally force human beings to do as they like, although they are not mind readers as in the films. Zellaby eventually proves that they are all telepathically linked and that the boys and the girls can be said to make up two distinct mental entities, something also manifest in their physical appearance since the members of each gender are identical among them.

Zellaby soon comes to the conclusion that these Children are clever alien changelings using the strategy of the cuckoo to replace the human race, a deduction which has important implications. On the one hand, it frees the parents from all responsibility over their welfare, to the point that even Zellaby's daughter abandons her baby boy. On the other hand, Zellaby's inference poses the question of whether it is legitimate or not to kill them as he suggests, because, in his words, "I now find, when I feel - as I never expected to feel - my situation at the summit of creation to be threatened, that I don't like a bit" (95). Zellaby also deduces that the alien invaders have chosen this fifth column tactic knowing, precisely, that human beings - at least, "English" human beings - would never kill a child.

In the last chapters of the novel Wyndham reaches a point in which the need to eliminate the Children has been clearly established among the villagers and the reader has been made to see that, since these are not "real" human children, they can and "mus"t be killed. As one of the boys, rather "the" boy, calmly states "you cannot afford 'not' to kill us, for if you don't, you are finished..." (170), "you" meaning here all human beings. As happens, however, there have been less successful Dayouts all over the world: in Australia all the babies were stillborn, in the North Pole the terrified Eskimos committed mass infanticide, in Mongolia both the accidental mothers and the children were taken for demons and killed, and in Russia the soviet government finally nuked them and their host village. The Russians warn the world to eliminate the Children but, paradoxically, Midwich's have so far survived because the British military intelligence decides to protect them, thinking they might turn out to be geniuses, hence an important Cold War weapon.

Knowing this, the Midwich Children gamble their survival on a daring bet in favour of the British sense of fair play. As "the" girl puts it, no British Government can find a satisfactory solution to the dilemma of whether to kill or protect them and still stay in power: a Tory solution (genocide) is unthinkable in the midst of English civilization, whereas Labour, as she claims, "will defend our rights as a threatened minority, and children, at that" (171).

The girl sums up the situation quite nicely when she says that "we are all, you see, toys of the life force. It made you numerically strong, but physically weak. It made us mentally strong, but physically weak: now it has set us at one another, to see what will happen". (173) Col. Westcott sees the conflict in terms of an ethical stalemate: Britain must be protected from the Children but its values determine that it is wrong to kill unprotected minors. Disregarding the finer moral points, Zellaby comes to an utilitarian solution: kill the Children at the lowest possible cost, that is to say, sacrificing only his own life.

In *The Bad Seed*, Christine, the desperate mother of the psychopathic child Rhoda, gives her enough sleeping pills to kill her before she shoots herself dead. The girl survives the attempted murder whereas in the film the studio had a providential rod of lightning fall on her. *The Midwich Cuckoos* goes even further, having Zellaby plan the mass murder of around 60 children, something he manages by blowing himself up together with them. Marianne Kincaid Speller notes that significantly, the British government does finally nothing to help Midwich solve its problem:

> We are once more back in familiar Wyndham territory, with the individual having to take responsibility for his own future, rather than waiting for the government to do anything about it for him, which in itself is a problematic attitude; one has only to think about American survivalist groups, and the so-called mountain men to realise that this can get way out of control. One wonders what Wyndham would have made of the premillennial upheavals we're now witnessing. (1998)

Or of Timothy McVeigh's infamous act of defiance against the US federal government, the Oklahoma City bombing. As happens, Carpenter's *Village of the Damned* was released less than a month before McVeigh's attack against this building, which also housed a day nursery. Many children died and the image of a fireman carrying a dead baby in his arms became world famous, which surely may explain why Carpenter's film failed. Ironically, the terrorist McVeigh and Zellaby turn out to be the two sides of the same coin.

The problem with *Midwich* is that even though the paranoiac Darwinian plot may strike a deep chord it simultaneously asks readers to engage in actively wanting the death of a group of children. The Children are thoroughly dehumanised and made to behave as oddly as possible, but, still

"they are" children. One thing is using an alien monster such as those of Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, or those of *Independence Day* to name more modern invaders, as scapegoats to vent our fears that the universe might keep nasty surprises in store for the human species. Quite another is have those aliens take the shape of human children. What, we wonder, is meant by this?

Bill Osgerby explains that "in the decades that followed 1945 a range of factors combined to highlight the social "visibility" of the young, giving British youngsters definition as a distinct cultural entity as never before and convincing many contemporary commentators that post-war youth was palpably different from previous generations of young people" (17). The 1950s and the 1960s were, as noted, the baby-boom age and there is no doubt that in a sense this is what *Midwich*'s mass pregnancy reflects. Osgerby adds significantly that "throughout the fifties and early sixties, for example, a sense of uncertainty and apprehension always attended young people's patterns of consumption, youth culture invariably being taken as the nadir of post-war cultural change, a malignant presence lurking in the shadows of 'affluent society'" (33). Midwich's Children no doubt reflect the fear that this massive baby-boom generation would soon displace the old, quiet world of the many English sleepy hollows and, what is more, would do away with all adult authority. This is why the most terrifying scene in the novel - missing in the films - shows the Children literally shattering the mind of an old-fashioned Chief Constable, naively attempting to control them in the name of seniority. His last words are also the final words of a dying authoritarianism the Children simply reject:

> "You damned blackguard! You insufferable little prig! How dare you speak to me like that! Do you understand that I represent the police force of this country? If you don't, it's time you learnt it, and I'll see that you do, b'God. Talking to your elders like that, you swollen-headed little upstart! So you're not to be "molested"; you'll defend yourselves, will you! Where do you think you are? You've got a lot to learn, m'lad, a whole -" (156)

To the aloof Children, it is quite clear that those who must learn are the adults.

Bill Osgerby further explains that the new 1950s youth culture was the creation of the working classes, whose youth had for the first time money and time enough in their hands to spare and who, also for the first time, refused to

plan for the future as a consequence of the recent devastating war. Wyndham's teenage children are not described in terms of class and are clearly very different from 1950s teenagers in the sense that they all wear very conservative clothing - blue cotton shirts and grey trousers for the boys, short pleated grey skirts and yellow shirts for the girls - and crave for nothing material. They are paradoxically, insatiable consumers of knowledge, which is provided for them by the Ministry of Education, just as the real Ministry did for underprivileged English children. The Ministry actually becomes the Children's parent "de facto" when they decide to leave their homes to live communally in the Grange, the former military facility, much to the relief of their foster families. Zellaby is one of their teachers and the way he describes their relationship may ring a bell for those involved in secondary education: "Such understanding as passed between himself and them was curiously partial and impersonal; it lacked the dimension of feeling and sympathy. Their real lives seemed to be lived in a world of their own, as shut off from the main current as those of any Amazonian tribe with its utterly different standards and ethics". (117) The Children's home is the place Zellaby finally blows up, which suggests that Wyndham is metaphorically telling the British Government to control the unruly teenagers it is responsible for through the policies of the welfare state, or else... British civilization will collapse.

Whatever or whoever sent the Children to Midwich finally loses the Darwinian battle. The novel closes with a passage from the suicide note left by Zellaby: "If you want to keep alive in the jungle, you must live as the jungle does" (190). The sacrificial hero, sounding here like a cross between H.G. Wells and Rambo, restores the lost balance and Midwich can go on breeding wholly human children. Or can it?

Fiction like *Midwich Cuckoos* and the other novels and films mentioned here has the strange power of spreading the paranoia it thrives on. Readers know it is a fantasy, and we can even produce educated guesses as to what prompted its morbid content, as I hope to have done here. Still, (mis)representations tend to cast a black shadow over reality, which is why they matter so much. Victorian adults used to imagine children were sexually innocent because their attitude towards them was often tinged with an eroticism they couldn't cope with. We imagine murderous, evil children because - let's face it - we'd rather think "they're" monsters than "we" inept parents. Whenever a child does murder another child in real life, adults feel both puzzled and relieved: they "are" monsters, after all, but what should we

do about them? The excuse of the mysterious pregnancy and the intervention of the Ministry of Education allows Wyndham to acquit the parents from their responsibility over their own Children and to pass this onto the Government - their educator and tutor - which shows things haven't changed much in the last fifty years. His final solution is even more monstrous than the Children but, surely, this is what fiction is for: to feel horrified and thus control the murderous impulses we might feel in real life.

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FROM THE PERIPHERY TO THE CENTRE: MINGHELLA RESPONDS TO ONDAATJE IN HIS ADAPTATION OF *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

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> "The only solution I could think of ... was to offer a response to the book rather than an adaptation of it".
> Anthony Minghella[1]

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) has often been described as a post-colonial novel, at least in so far as it presents the reader with a number of parallel ex-centric narratives, emerging out of a disintegrating centre. These narratives alternate to explore the theme of identity, while they overlap obliterating individuality and questioning the nature of identity itself. To do so, the text draws on post-structuralist notions of meaning and history.[2] Foucault, in this connection, argues that

> ... a statement is always an event that neither the language (*langue*) nor the meaning can quite exhaust. It is certainly a strange event: first, because on the one hand it is linked to the gesture of writing or to the articulation of speech, and also on the other hand it opens up to itself a residual existence in the field of a memory, or in the materiality of manuscripts, books, or any other form of recording; secondly, because, like every event, it is unique, yet subject to repetition, transformation, and reactivation; thirdly,

[1] Carla Power (82).

[2] Derrida (Loomba 36), for example, suggests that there is always a gap in the sign between signifier and signified, and that consequently no text can perfectly convey its own meaning, since meaning lies precisely in this gap (notion of "differance"). Thus, if we analyse the text closely (process of deconstruction), it will inevitably reveal its own instability, its contradictions.