



Naomi Michalowicz //

Babies are full of potential. Every parent, looking at their infant child, will inevitably ask themselves, who will this baby become? What will he like doing? What will her strengths, abilities, and skills, turn out to be? It's impossible not to wonder what the future holds for a small baby when their whole life is ahead of them. But this speculation, this futuristic image overlaying the present of babyhood, is not only the spontaneous response of adoring parents; it partakes in a deep-seated cultural metaphor that equates youth, childhood and infancy with futurity and potential, a framework in which the significance of babies is not who or what they currently are, but what they may become.

Considering the future-orientation of the genre, it is perhaps surprising that not more science-fiction stories are written about young children. An obvious exception to that is the story "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," published in 1943 by Lewis Padgett (pseudonym of the writers Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore). In "Mimsy," siblings Scott and Emma discover a box of toys sent through a time machine from the distant future; the toys rewire the children's brains as they play, and teach them to think in what the story calls "x logic" (198)—recognition of patterns that adults, limited to the conventions of the "Euclidean pattern" (188), cannot see. The parents, increasingly disturbed by how different from normal their children are becoming, are nevertheless incapable of recognizing the extent of that difference until it's too late, when her children have worked out how to transport themselves into the future from which the toys came and disappear, leaving behind them an array of objects organized in a pattern which the parents, left behind, are still incapable of reading.

As science fiction tends to do, "Mimsy" literalizes a metaphorical construction—children are the future—by sending the children into the future, literally. But the story also reveals another dimension to the idea that children are the future by drawing out the extreme implications of the

tabula rasa principle, which implicitly supports the conception of childhood as pure potentiality. “Mimsy” pushes the *tabula rasa* thesis to its utmost limits, by suggesting not only that babies are a blank slate in terms of the knowledge they will acquire through socialization and experience, but also in terms of the very basics of their cognitive makeup. Not only the contents of the human mind, but also its very form and structure, are pure potentiality at a young age.

The science-fictional interpretation of the idea that babies are the future, then, ultimately suggests that babies are, or can be, not fully human. “Mimsy” makes this point explicitly, describing how the younger child, Emma, “had become conditioned to x much faster” than her slightly older brother: “She was thinking ... Not like an adult or a child. Not even like a human” (202). The older a child is — the more conditioned their mind is in human logic — the more human they are. Emma is two years old, and therefore more mentally adaptable and open than the older Scott, who is already in school. Presumably, a baby younger than Emma would be even more quickly and easily trained in “x logic,” and is, therefore, even less human in their cognitive makeup.

But if one approach to babies emphasizes their future potentiality—and links the futurity inherent to babyhood to the otherness, the non-humanity of babies—a different, and perhaps even more deeply entrenched view, sees babies as emblematic of both humanity and humanity’s past. In 1877, Charles Darwin published a short essay titled “A Biographical Sketch of an Infant,” in which he collects and summarizes his journal observations of his oldest son William Erasmus Darwin’s infancy. This article is worth reading, and not least because of its endearing combination of scientific detachment and a father’s pride and delight in his son:

When our infant was only four months old I thought that he tried to imitate sounds; but I may have deceived myself, for I was not thoroughly convinced that he did so until he was ten months old. At the age of 11½ months he could readily imitate all sorts of actions, such as shaking his head and saying “Ah” to any dirty object, or by carefully and slowly putting his forefinger in the middle of the palm of his other hand, to the childish rhyme of ‘Pat it and pat it and mark it with T’. It was amusing to behold his pleased expression after successfully performing any such accomplishment. (291)

Throughout the short article, the descriptive observations are often followed by speculation regarding the origin of a certain action. So, for example, observations such as the fact that “a warm soft hand applied to his face” (285) when the baby was a few days old “excited a wish to suck” (286), is followed by the hypothesis that “this must be considered as a reflex or an instinctive action, for it is impossible to believe that experience and association with the touch of his mother’s breast could so soon have come into play” (286).

These observations reflect a tendency in the science of the time to draw conclusions, from the way babies act and respond, regarding the origins of the human race: if, the logic goes, an infant who is not yet habituated and experienced with “the touch of his mother’s breast” nevertheless knows to root for it, then this rooting reflex must be an example of evolutionary inheritance. The idea that infant behavior can provide a window to the human race’s origins is key to the “recapitulation theory,” a view most closely associated with German scientist Ernest Haeckel. In 1866, Haeckel published a book in which he formulated the “biogenetic law,” neatly summarized in the phrase

“ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny”; in other words, the biogenetic law claims that the development of the individual, from embryo to adult, retraces the evolution of the species, and that each stage in the development of the individual therefore parallels “an adult form of an evolutionary ancestor” (Embryo Project Encyclopedia). This theory has been contested, criticized and refuted throughout the 20th century. Specifically, its blatantly racist aspects have been repeatedly pointed out and utterly rejected: proponents of recapitulation theory have inferred from the biogenetic law that non-white races represent a “lower” evolutionary stage, and are comparable to children in terms of, for example, intellectual ability: the psychologist G. Stanley Hall has thus suggested that traditional Native American crafts and occupations be taught to white children, because these activities “represented an earlier stage of development that aligned with the instincts of the child” (Fallace 524).

But even as the scientific racism of Haeckel’s biogenetic law has been thoroughly rejected in the 21st century, and even as its science has been questioned and refuted, the idea that the observation of human infants can provide insight into the evolution of the human race has been remarkably persistent. In 2020, Netflix aired a new docuseries titled *Babies*, following the families of 15 babies around the world during the first year of their lives, as well as 36 scientists studying different aspects of infant development. From the very beginning, the idea of studying babies as a way of understanding humanity is emphasized: 14 seconds into the show’s trailer, a voice-over questions, “isn’t it amazing that the answer to what it means to be human lies in the smallest, youngest creatures—our babies?”

The opening sequence of *Babies*, which features a chubby baby floating in blue water, the camera following first its toe, then a cheek, then a forehead, evokes the metaphor of the ocean for its documentation of the science of babies. *Babies*, this visual tells us, are mysterious, unknown, and almost alien, like the creatures of the deepest oceans, which science has yet to catalog and explain. The connection made in the opening sequence between babies and the mysteries of the ocean is not merely a cute reference to another docuseries, *The Blue Planet*. A review in *The Guardian* described it as “a lush Blue Planet-esque opening with a lovely fat baby suspended in water instead of a beluga.” Rather, it suggests that babies, like the fish monsters in the horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, are the uncanny merging of original humanity and the utterly alien mystery of the sea. In other words, whether babies are conceptualized as emblematic of humanity’s past or its future, their very belonging in the category of humanity is called into question.

Image: mmbm.ch; Collection Dr. F. Käppeli

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