

Village of the Damned

US : 1995 : dir. John Carpenter : Universal / Alphaville : 98 min
 prod: Michael Preger & Sandy King : scr: David Hemelstein : dir.ph.: Gary B Kibbe
Thomas Dekker; Lindsey Haun; Cody Dorrin; Thrishalee Hardy; Jessye Quarry; Adam Robbins; Chelsea DeRidder Simms; Renée René Simms; Danielle Wiener; Hillary Harvey; Bradley Wilhelm; Jennifer Wilhelm
 Christopher Reeve; Kirstie Alley; Linda Kozlowski; Michael Pare; Meredith Salenger;
 Mark Hamill; Pippa Peartree; Peter Jason; Constance Forslund; Karen Kahn; Buck Flower

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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"A strange mist overcomes an idyllic coastal town, causing ten women to give birth to children who turn out to be mind-controlling demons! Carpenter's remake of the 1960 film is, naturally, more explicit and more violent, with some new characters who don't make much sense (especially Alley) but the premise is still potent enough to pull you in. Shot in Panavision. **½ "

Source unknown - review of the soundtrack LP:

"One of the few people who scores as well as directs his own films, John Carpenter has, in the past, provided memorable musical accompaniment to such movies as "ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13", "HALLOWE'EN" and "THE FOG". With "VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED" (Varese) he is assisted by Dave Davies, founder member and lead guitarist of The Kinks, with whom he's composed an ambient synth score for this remake of the British classic.

Things kick off with the lengthy "March of the Children", but no paean to innocence this. Straightaway the doom-laden tones, backed by the harsh sounds of a snare drum, tell us that we're in horror movie country. Unfortunately, this proves to be one of the few lively tracks on the album, the lack of a central "HALLOWE'EN"-style theme reducing the music here to little more than a selection of gloomy chords and rumblings, the sort of thing

you'd expect to find in a low budget video rather than a glossy Hollywood production."

[no listing in "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995"]

TV Quick review:

"Glossy remake of the British sci-fi suspense¹, which shifts John Wyndham's creepy classic "The Midwich Cuckoos" to New England. A mysterious mist overcomes a small village, causing the residents to black out. But, when they awake, several women find themselves pregnant, eventually giving birth to strange blond babies with telekinetic powers. Christopher Reeve is the upstanding voice of reason who senses that something sinister is afoot. The cast includes Kirstie "Cheers" Alley, Linda "CROCODILE DUNDEE" Kozlowski and Mark "STAR WARS" Hamill. *** "

"Sci-fi. The women of an idyllic (but misty!) coastal settlement give birth to a batch of mind-controlling demons². *** "

¹ Or "thriller", as we say in English

² this (inaccurate) phrase cribbed directly from Maltin

This must have been one of Christopher Reeve's last performances before the fateful riding accident which left him a quadraplegic. Hardly the swansong he would have wished for, although he certainly goes out with a bang.

There aren't too many films which require us to root for the summary murders of nine children, and in the 1960 original that was one of the more chilling aspects of the story. Audiences have coarsened in the intervening years, and films with them, so one hardly bats an eyelid when the populace of Midwich converge on the changelings with murderous intent. How come, by the way, since it has a modern day setting, the villagers still march on their tormentors with flaming brands, spouting the old testament, like some scene from an old **Frankenstein** film? If it's intended as a reference, it has all the subtlety of a foghorn.

The fact this received no theatrical release in the UK, despite the box office value of Carpenter's name, gives some indication of its quality. It has a cast of B-list star names and, though Maltin doesn't indicate it as a TV movie, it certainly has that production-line look about it. So how does it compare?

The credits acknowledge that David Hemelstein's script was adapted as much from the 1960 screenplay as the Wyndham source novel, and many of the incidents in it are replicated. In place of George Sanders' scientist we have Christopher Reeves' small-town GP, and Kirstie Alley's character is written in as a cold-blooded government doctor using Midwich as an incubator for clinical observation (as before, there are similar colonies of aberrant youngsters sprinkled about the globe).

This is the 1990s, so of course the gender of the lead child must be altered to female – how predictable these writers are – Martin Stephens undergoing a sex change to Lindsey Haun. The only genuine departure from the original is as follows, and even that has to be seen as a sop to US audiences' fixation with happy endings: one of the alien brood, David (Thomas Dekker) becomes humanised through the loss of his intended mate, learns to "empathise" and consequently must be salvaged from the destruction of his fellows. They just couldn't bear to wipe out the mutant kiddies and leave it at that, there must be some spark of redemption.

Carpenter makes no attempt to explore the nature or purpose of the cuckoos any more than the first film did, but contents with a few graphic horror shots and a glimpse of the alien creature which died at birth. It seems he was aiming for a horror audience then, but by that yardstick this is far too mild to compete with a video market saturated with horror titles. The conclusion must be that he had this remake in the back of his mind for years, and simply ran it off for want of any more interesting project to hand. All in all, he needn't have bothered.

As for his insistence on scoring most of his own films (not, thankfully, "**THE THING**", which benefited greatly from an ominous Ennio Morricone score), his versatility does not stretch to more than a simple, catchy but highly repetitive rhythm or theme that persists reel after reel, and it's hard not to view this as naked self-indulgence on his part. For the relatively low-budget "**ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13**" this was certainly effective, but once he'd broken into mainstream Hollywood production he should have stuck to the director's chair.

Of the twelve children listed in the cast I can only put another title to Thomas Dekker, who played Captain Picard's fantasy son in "**STAR TREK GENERATIONS**" the year before.

See the superior 1960 original, and its sequel "**CHILDREN OF THE DAMNED**" (for which the children were made, not emissaries from another planet, but mutant forerunners of a later stage in human development), and subject index under **THE CHILD AS EVIL IN OUR MIDST, HORROR, PRODIGIES / GIFTED CHILDREN** and **SCIENCE FICTION**.