

Ambiguity, Children, Representation, and Sexuality

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Abstract: In her article "Ambiguity, Children, Representation, and Sexuality" Catharine Lumby considers current and historical scholarly and popular debates about the representation of children, including concerns about their sexualisation in such representations. The article begins by examining images taken by photographers in the Victorian era, including Charles Dodgson and Julia Cameron, and asks not only how the gaze of the photographer frames the child but how the child returns the adult gaze. Lumby seeks to problematize our understanding of the ways in which images "sexualize" children. Drawing on the work of James Kincaid, it examines discourses that frame children as, on one hand, naturally innocent, yet, on the other, as unnaturally corruptible. It explores how these discourses underpin current popular debates about the alleged sexualisation of children through amateur and commercial photography. Animating Lumby's argumentation are the questions: what draws us to images of children? What disturbs us about them? and what is at stake in the gaze of the child? Ultimately, Lumby argues that anxieties about representations of children are always located in anxieties about the ambiguity of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood.

Catharine LUMBY

Ambiguity, Children, Representation, and Sexuality

The 1972 photographic album *Victorian Children* by Graham Ovenden and Robert Melville contains more than one hundred photographs of children taken in the Victorian era, most of them girls. Some are by recognized photographers, including Charles Dodgson and Julia Margaret Cameron. Others are by unknown photographers. The images in the book are familiar to anyone with even a passing interest in Victorian art and photography. Children are arranged in classical poses, dressed as character types, and posed as if caught in reveries. In a typical sequence, a girl of five undresses for her bath; in another image captioned "Commencing Young," a young boy and girl kiss. To the modern eye there is something unsettling about the coquettish gaze with which the little girls so often fix the camera. It is an unease which is only reinforced by author Robert Melville's comment in his preface. He writes: "Call it the little girl syndrome if you must, but in the matter of the subject that claims this album I think Proust should have the last word: 'It comes so soon, the moment when there is nothing left to wait for, when the body is fixed in an immobility which holds no fresh surprises in store ... it is so short, that radiant morning time that one comes to like only the very youngest girls, those in whom the flesh, like a precious leaven, is still at work'" (Ovenden and Melville n.p.).

The most disturbing images in the book, however, are the ones the reader cannot see. Plates 41 to 50 have been carefully removed. And it is only when you read the introductory essay that you are given a clue as to why. Melville tells us that these images are of child prostitutes and that they include a portrait of a pregnant ten year old and of two young girls engaging in sex while a woman looks on holding a whip. He writes: "more sinister trespassers have left their marks on this album of little girls. The invisible presence of pimps, brothel keepers and respectable gentleman hoping to slake their thirst for virgins in narrow vaginas dominates the group" (Ovenden and Melville n.p.). Being unable to view these images does not lessen the apprehension this description creates. On the contrary, their absence opens up a kind of void in which images proliferate; their invisibility makes them, in a perverse sense, hyper-visible. The missing images haunt the book, leaving their trace across the photographs that remain. These absent images symbolize a broader truth about child pornography. Child pornography, in most legal systems, refers to an occult category of media texts — to texts that are produced and exchanged in the most covert of environments. It's material whose content is unambiguous but whose form can only be imagined by the general public.

Only a very small group of people have ever seen images of children engaging in sexual acts with adults. And only a very small proportion of consumers of pornography claim to have any interest in seeing images of children engaged in sexual activity. In a recent study of the consumption of pornography in Australia only 1.8 per cent of the 1028 regular pornography consumers surveyed declared any interest in looking at child pornography and given the harsh criminal penalties attached to its consumption it seems reasonable to surmise that only a small group of those consumers would be willing to follow through on their stated interest and actually access material (see McKee, Albury, Lumby). And despite high profile international raids on consumers of child pornography, there is little evidence to support claims that the amount of child pornography actually being produced has ballooned (Levine 36-37). To give but one recent example, in 2004 the biggest police operation ever mounted in Australia to target consumers of child pornography netted just 194 men out of a population of 20 million. The chief of operations in the state of NSW, Detective Superintendent Kim McKay, told the media that Australia did not have large rings of child pornographers, that the internet had made distributors and consumers easier to catch, and that the real problem lay with the failure of some governments in developing and poorer countries to protect children from abuse (Crooks 41-42).

Child pornography, then, remains a largely amateur and rare form of media production, even in the age of the internet. Yet we are living through an era of enormous concern that children are everywhere being sexualized for the adult gaze. Child pornography may be all but invisible and yet it is omnipresent in anxious discourses about children, sexuality, and representation. We are living in a time when the specter of child pornography stalks even the most innocuous images — a time of profound moral panic about the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. And for all these reasons, it's a

fascinating time to think about what it is adults seek in images of children. To ask: What draws us to them? What disturbs us? What is at stake in the gaze of the child?

Australian writer and photographer Russ Grayson came home one evening to find a man standing on the footpath in front of his house taking photographs of frangipani flowers lit by the late afternoon sun. Frangipani trees are ubiquitous in Sydney and the air in many streets is fragrant with the perfume of the flowers all through summer. Grayson writes that on his approach the man asked if he minded him taking the photographs. "We started talking. He had recently developed an interest in photography and practiced by taking images around the neighborhood. Glancing to the young woman accompanying him, he said, 'I bring my wife with me ... I don't want to be mistaken for a paedophile.' A strange statement, I thought. What could taking photographs on a public street have to do with sex crimes against children?" (Grayson <<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au>>). The amateur photographer's apprehension, as Grayson goes on to note, is not as strange as it first seems. That summer had seen a number of attempts by local mayors in Sydney's beachside suburbs to ban photography of children in public places. The trigger for the proposed bans was the conviction of a man for nuisance after he was observed taking repeated covert photographs of topless women sunbathers with his mobile phone. But it was not topless women who were the subject of the intense public debate that followed. It was children who were deemed most at risk (Verghis 31).

In the Anglo-Australian cultural imaginary the beach is a central marker of national identity. It is a place that symbolizes the allegedly easy-going, egalitarian, and unpretentious Australian character. Many Australian children spend half their lives at the beach in summer. And until an awareness of skin cancer caused more attention to covering-up in the sun, most of them spent their summer half-naked. When the shadow of the pedophile falls across this iconic and idealized space, we can be sure that something very deep-rooted is troubling the relations between adults and children. A related and very contemporary panic around children and sexualized images concerns children's exposure to sexual material online. Exemplifying the hyperbole that often attends such assertions, the director of an influential Australian think-tank, Clive Hamilton, told the media that Australia was witnessing a dramatic increase in the number of children sexually assaulted by other children and that this could be directly attributed to their exposure to pornography online (qtd. in Hamilton 11). The link between the two was, by scholarly standards, entirely speculative. Hamilton's claims exemplify a well-known double-speak about children and sexuality which is constantly being played out in popular discourse. On one hand, children are portrayed as naturally innocent of sexual urges of any kind. At the same time, they are portrayed as unnaturally corruptible — as so easily contaminated that they may be preying on each other after the slightest exposure to the evils of the adult world. A similar dichotomy stalks popular discussions of child pornography. On one hand it is depicted as something so unthinkable and so outside the bounds of civilization that it is something only the monstrous could consume or produce. At the same time, we are told that even the most banal photos of children risk sexualizing them and that pedophilic instincts are ones you can literally "catch" from contact with such material.

Media commentary and reports on sexualised images of young girls, along with their alleged susceptibility to being sexualised, are ubiquitous. Ironically, they are often laden with highly sexualised language cloaked in moral outrage. An article warning of the terrible danger Britney Spears poses to teen girls begins this way: "They're young. They're sexy. They're little girls idolising young female pop stars prancing and gyrating on the stage. Clad in skin-tight hipsters and skimpy crop-tops, today's young female music idols are giving many parents angst as pre-pubescent and teen daughters emulate their provocative heroes" (Cassrels 4). It is a script which is both erotically and morally charged. It's a discourse that simultaneously allows the unsayable to be said and denied. To depart from it is to invite accusations of enabling or even perpetrating child sexual abuse. U.S. scholar Judith Levine begins her seminal account of the panic which attaches to children and sexuality, *Harmful to Minors*, by noting that: "In America today, it is nearly impossible to publish a book that says children and teenagers can have sexual pleasure and be safe too" (xix). One imagines that the truth of that sentence has been brought home to its author more than once since publication. The hinge figure for these moral panics around children and sexuality is, of course, the pedophile — a monstrous Other onto whom a host of anxieties about the impact of social, economic, and technological changes on family can be projected. As Levine notes, "dire assessments of a morally anarchic world are not new. But they tend

to crop up in times of social transformation, when the economy trembles or when social institutions crumble and many people feel they're losing control of their jobs, their futures, or their children's lives. At times like these, the child-molesting monster can be counted on to creep from the rubble" (29). Levine goes on to offer a host of examples of this particular moral panic which date back to the nineteenth century.

In his irreverent and incisive book, *The Culture of Child Molesting*, literary critic James Kincaid argues that we have been so busy constructing children as "at risk" of sexual predators that we have no other way of seeing children. Ironically, he suggests, it is the would-be protectors of children who most perpetuate this notion of children as sexualised: "We have made the child we are protecting from sexual horrors into a being defined exclusively by sexual images and terms: the child is defined as the sexual lure, the one in danger, the one capable of attracting nothing but sexual thoughts" (Kincaid 282-83). Kincaid offers a powerful analysis of the relationship between the idealization of childhood as a state of innocence and the eroticisation of passivity. He writes of the Romantic idealization of the child: "The child was figured as *free of* adult corruptions; *not yet burdened* with the weight of responsibility, mortality and sexuality; *liberated from* 'the light of the common day' ... Childhood, to a large extent, came to be in our culture a coordinate set of have nots, of negations; the child was the one who *did not have*. Its liberty was a negative attribute" (Kincaid 15). At the same time, Kincaid argues, innocence became a sexual fulcrum. It was, on one hand, a quality to be guarded at all costs, and, on the other, the ultimately desirable commodity. One of Kincaid's central claims is that hyperbolic proclamations of children's innocence fuel rather than deny their eroticisation. That insisting on their "purity" amounts to an evacuation of children's agency which allows the admirer to "discover the erotic in that which is most susceptible to inscription, the blank page" (Kincaid 16). Childhood innocence, he suggests, is a quality adults are in far greater need of than children.

In 1867, at the age of thirty-five, Charles Dodgson began to photograph children naked — or *sans habillement* as he dubbed it coyly. Only four authenticated records of this practice survive, as Dodgson destroyed most of the negatives and prints of his nude studies and the rest were destroyed, at his request, by his executors (Cohen 165). To the modern adult eye, all of Dodgson's photographs of children, clothed or naked, offer what seems irrefutable evidence of an erotic dimension to his interest in children. It is not simply that the poses and clothing they have been asked to assume are coquettish, it is their look — the gaze with which they so often fix the camera. It is a look which carries traces of the look we describe as knowing in an adult, but which, in a child, forces the viewer to ask: what did they know? No sensitive child could have mistaken the curious power they held over Dodgson. He went to extraordinary lengths to entertain and delight them, labouring over illustrations, jokes, stories, letters, and excursion. Unlike other adults, he sought their company in preference to that of their parents. But if some children must have perceived that they had an unusual hold over Dodgson, Dodgson himself had a keen understanding of the power adults routinely exercised over children. Writing as Lewis Carroll, he broke the mould of children's literature in a significant way — he tried to write from a child's perspective, parodying educational texts and the moralistic tone that marked so many children's books of the time. In 1867, Dodgson sent a conventional children's book to a young friend with a note which began: "The book is intended for you to look at the outside, and then put it away in the bookcase; the *inside* is not meant to be read. The book has got a moral — so I need hardly say it is *not* by Lewis Carroll" (Dodgson qtd. in Cohen 142).

Violence towards children, masked as moral and educational instruction, makes a frequent appearance in Dodgson's stories. While singing a lullaby to her child, for instance, the Duchess throws him violently up and down and intones: "Speak roughly to your little boy, And beat him when he sneezes." It is this talent for describing a world ruled by authority figures from a child's point of view that has doubtless helped guarantee the continuing success of the Alice books with children. But Dodgson's photographs remind us that no matter how intense his empathy with children was, his relationships with them were still characterized by a fundamental asymmetry of perspective. The costumes, props, poses, and faux landscape settings reveal the adult imagination at work framing the world of the child. Like the Romantic poets he loved, Dodgson was wont to project an idealized, angelic purity on childhood. To the mother of the Hatch girls, whom he photographed nude, Dodgson

wrote: "Their innocent unconsciousness is very beautiful and gives one a feeling of reverence, as at the presence of something sacred" (Dodgson qtd. in Cohen 166).

This same hyperbolic assertion of the innocence of children can be found in two distinct discourses — in the claims of those who seek to protect children from corruption and in texts that deliberately eroticise the young. The home page of a website devoted to images of young girls' feet declares that the Fresh Petals Society was "created to celebrate and promote the exquisite charm and beauty of young female feet ... our name describes a little girl's toes, which are like the fresh petals of a flower." Visitors to the site are invited to purchase images. The site also features an extensive list of artwork, literary works, and films which depict young girls in bare feet. What makes the images posted on the site simultaneously fascinating and repellent is the ambiguous status of what the girls know about their photographer. In some of the images, it seems pretty clear that they know quite a lot. In others, the image appears to have been taken in the course of a domestic routine — there is no sense that anything out of the ordinary attends its production. On entering the website the visitor is greeted by an image which might have been taken in the 1950s. A young girl smiles, her chin cupped in her hands, her blonde hair caught up with a bow. She wears a starched Sunday-best frock. Among the pornographic material recommended to Fresh Petal readers is the classic musical *The Sound of Music*. Apparently, young female feet feature prominently in a scene where Julie Andrews sings "My Favorite Things" to her small charges.

There is, unquestionably, something deeply ethically disturbing about a website which uses images of children for sexual gratification in this way. But what makes the Fresh Petal website an interesting case study in the eroticisation of children is that there is nothing illegal on the site. There are no images of children engaging in sexual activities. There is no nudity. The texts that are recommended to visitors are all mainstream and often G-rated popular cultural texts. This unsettling convergence reminds us that images of children as devoid of agency — as empty pages to write on — are everywhere. Hyperbolic assertions of the need to protect the sanctity of childhood from corruption by the adult world are equally claims that children lack agency or even full humanity. They are often bids to control children in the guise of protecting them. The very thing, then, that responsible adults are most concerned about their children being subject to — i.e., sexual attention from adults — may in fact be deeply rooted in a denial that children have any sexuality or agency of their own. That much of the erotic fetishization of children trades on the breaching of an ultimate cultural taboo. Or to look at the problem from another angle, both discourses of protection and discourses which sexualise children are mired in denial — on one hand, they portray children as pure beings who are absolutely other to the adult world, yet on the other they represent them as always on the threshold of becoming sexual. There is, in other words, a clear if submerged interdependence between these two apparently opposed claims.

A nude photo of a girl named Evelyn Hatch by Dodgson that shows her lying naked on a stretch of grass. Her young body is posed in a way that imitates idealized fine art nudes, but her gaze disrupts this paradigm. She looks directly at the viewer. It is a look that is familiar to art historians — a look much analyzed in discussions of Manet's *Olympia*. It is a look that suggests a preoccupation with private thoughts, but it is also a profoundly ambiguous look — a look that intimates an alternative perspective, one that evades the authority of both the photographer and the viewer. In her essay "His Master's Eye" Mieke Bal asks: "Is vision as a mode of representation, knowledge, and sexual relationality especially pervasive in modernity? And is it bound up with patriarchy?" (379). Bal goes on to note that both questions assume that it is possible to define vision in a universal or even essentialist way. Bal rejects this proposition and argues for a differential analysis of vision that allows us to pay attention to what remains invisible in the unified category. Bal prosecutes this claim through a detailed analysis of two famous nudes: Rembrandt's *Danae* and Manet's *Olympia*. Citing Kenneth Clark's ambivalence towards the former, Bal argues that his reaction is really a recognition that "it is as if the woman in the picture is aware of Clark's attempt to subject her to his master's gaze, and responds by dismissing him" (391). Turning to Manet's picture, Bal offers a compelling analysis of the ambiguity encoded in it. A prime example, for Bal, is the look which the naked woman directs at the viewer. She writes: "The look is daunting — it has made critics angry, doubtlessly for not being sufficiently submissive, encouraging, condoning or complicit with the visual intrusion. It is unreadable because it is both

offensively impolite and at the same time self-enclosed. For from afar she seems to look at the viewer in challenge and refusal; but in close-up the look is directed nowhere if not at some inner vision, an anticipation of some pleasure no viewer of the painting will participate in. The doubt cast by critics on her sexuality is displaced from the doubt that they, the viewers, can own it" (397).

What Bal's analysis of both images points up is the way that certain images trouble us precisely because they focus us on what has hitherto remained invisible in a particular tradition or mode of seeing. She cites John Rachjman on Foucault's claim that there exists a "positive unconscious" of vision, endorsing the former's proposition that all eras "let some things be seen and not others" and that "there is much more regularity, much more *constraint*, in what we can see than we suppose" (391). Bal's focus is quite specifically on two interventions in the tradition of representing the female body in art history — intentional and formal interventions by artists in this history and the relations between viewer and viewed. It would be an error to assume that her analysis can be unproblematically transferred to any category of visual communication. With this caveat in mind, however, I argue that Bal offers us some very interesting key terms with which to re-examine the trouble that currently surrounds photographic representations of children. In particular, I am interested in the way Bal directs us away from a binary mode of understanding vision and towards pluralistic readings. For Bal, the ambiguity that has troubled so many viewers of *Olympia* is also enabling — it opens up new ways of seeing gender, class, race, and sexuality, rather than confirming them as fixed and determining categories.

If we return to Rachjman's exposition of Foucault's positive unconscious, it is clear that the relationship between visibility and invisibility is an unstable one and that the strong reactions some images provoke may in fact be an attempt to repress an image or thought which has crept unbidden into frame. The violence of the reaction of Manet's critics, for instance, might be read as hostility not to the fact that the woman could be a prostitute or that she is an "ordinary" woman offered in the guise of a fine art nude, but that she refuses, through her gaze, to affirm or deny her status for the viewer. She is not, in one sense, there for us. And as Bal suggests, perhaps the Black woman holding flowers who is seated behind us is not, as so many have supposed, her servant, but a friend who came to visit. There are many other plausible ways of reading this image. As we have seen, images of children today are frequently scrutinized for overtones of the erotic — for traces of adult desires. It's a discourse that forces such images into a binary — children are either represented as properly innocent of the adult world or they are portrayed as horribly corrupted and, implicitly, corrupting. Summarizing the growing body of literature on the cultural history of childhood, Jyotsna Kapur notes that the construction of children as innocent of the adult world of money, sex, and social violence dates back to the emergence of the nuclear bourgeois family in the nineteenth century. In the bourgeois home, she writes, "Raising children was elevated to the level of sacred duty. Children were glorified, as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings, as the embodiment of some eternal truth outside the contradictions of sexuality and social inequality" (Kapur 125).

Over the course of the late twentieth century, this (still resonant) construction of children has come under increasingly direct challenge by marketing and popular cultural formats which positioned them as consumers — as sovereign individuals with their own tastes, desires, and capital. In the twenty-first century, children are not simply a market in themselves — they are also regarded as enormously influential when it comes to influencing the way adults spend their dollars on toys, snack-food and drink, clothing, shoes, books, films, and computers. This hailing of children as consumers is in direct conflict with the notion of childhood as a zone free of adult concerns and critiques of this consumerism are often conflated with concerns about the alleged inappropriate sexualising of children.

In a recent article that typifies these concerns, journalist Rachel Morris quotes a children's media advocate and a senior academic in support of her claim that the sexualization of young girls has reached disturbing levels. Displaying a voyeurism which often shadows these kinds of jeremiads, Morris suggests we should all wander down to our local shopping centre "or any place where kids congregate and *marvel* at the women-children, old beyond their years, in make-up, heels, short skirts and boob tubes — minus the breasts." In a familiar move, Morris then links what she dubs the "adultification" of our children to "the high profile murders of young girls — the latest being innocent 10 year old best friends Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman." Claims like those that ground Morris's article circulate

constantly in our media and are often supported by academics claiming expertise in children's media consumption. But they are protective discourses predicated on a telling absence — on the absence of the voices of the young girls themselves. It is an absence that suggests that there is something more at stake in these discourses of protection than concern for the well-being of children. Ultimately, they are discourses grounded in a much broader cultural and social history which authorizes the adult control and surveillance of children, licenses violence against them for the purposes of discipline, and sees children treated as less than fully human in both public and private sphere terms. Indeed, if we begin to analyse the images that are the locus of the greatest concern, they are often ones that involve young people exhibiting themselves or returning the adult gaze. They are sites, in other words, in which it becomes apparent that children and teenagers are not entirely without agency or insight into the adult world and, as such, they are sites which force adults to recognize that power relations between children, teenagers, and their adult counterparts are not so asymmetrical or fixed. None of which is to suggest that the desire to ensure children and young teenagers have a space to develop that is largely free of adult concerns is always repressive. Rather, it's to point to the importance of not continually imposing an adult frame of reference on children — of recognizing that their relationships to their bodies, their sexuality, and more broadly to culture and media do not have to be figured as either childlike or adult.

As Catherine Driscoll reminds us in her analysis of the popularity of the Spice Girls in the 1990s among pre-teen and early teen girls, understanding the way children and teenagers consume culture is never as simple as making a choice between conformism and agency. If we can, for a moment, take the Spice Girls as emblematic of much of the culture which has been attacked for encouraging young girls to "grow up too fast" in recent times, then Driscoll's analysis offers a useful and more nuanced way out of the binary impasse. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Driscoll argues that the popularity of the (highly commercialised and overtly sexualised) group is actually grounded in a more productive relationship between complicity and agency than critics of the impact of this kind of popular culture on young girls would admit. She uses the "irresolvable ambiguity," which Butler says, "arises when one attempts to distinguish between the power that (transitively) enacts the subject" as a frame with which to think through the "tension between imagining and becoming a girl" (Driscoll 189). This concept of becoming is obviously a very key term with which to understand the ambiguous territory which separates the world of adults and children. When adults look at images of children we inevitably invest them with traces of our own desires. But it is equally important to remember that no image is ever so wholly compliant. As Bal writes: "there are many other ways of looking around; only we don't see them because there are certain gazes that take all the authority" (400).

In conclusion, Bal's observation is a reminder that the meaning of a photograph is not something that simply resides within its frame. Meaning arises out of a range of possible interactions: between the photographer and the subject, between the subject and the photographer, and between the image and the viewer. In times like these, which are marked by a high anxiety about the need to protect children from predatory adults, it is all too easy to inscribe images with the worst of all possible readings: to look at them through the eyes of the potential paedophile. Doing so, however, not only strips out the ambiguities of a given image but equally denies the child whose image is captured any agency. If we insist that children can only ever be objects of the adult gaze, then we ignore their subjecthood and, under the guise of protection, risk promoting discourses that privilege control.

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