

VULNERABILITY AND THE PASSING OF CHILDHOOD IN BILL HENSON: INNOCENCE IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION¹

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In May 2008 the Australian art community was delivered a shock when one of its luminaries, photographer Bill Henson, received popular attention for all the wrong reasons. The opening night of his exhibition at the Roslyn Oxley9 gallery, in Sydney's cosmopolitan suburb of Paddington, was cancelled, and works seized by the NSW police force due to a complaint by child-protection activist, Hetty Johnson. The complaint was leveled particularly at the event's invitation to friends of the gallery, which used an image of a naked adolescent girl. The exhibition had also received adverse coverage from *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Miranda Devine, who wrote in the name of 'innocent childhood' that:

The effort over many decades by various groups—artists, perverts, academics, libertarians, the media and advertising industries, respectable corporations and the porn industry—to smash taboos of previous generations and define down community standards, has successfully eroded the special protection once afforded childhood.²

Thus the boundaries of conflict were drawn: boundaries that echo similar controversies in the US and Britain, pitting the apparently competing concerns for the protection of children against the freedom of artistic expression.³ On one side, Henson was portrayed as an exploiter of children, and representative of a leisure class that flouts community morality. On the other, he was heralded as an artist of first merit, whose work is above the scrutiny of tabloid-reading philistines.⁴ The divided nature of the discussion meant that a middle ground was difficult to occupy. The child-protection camp was allowed to lay claim to the feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability many viewers experienced regarding Henson's images. The heated public discourse surrounding the Henson exhibition was organised in terms of the 'sexualisation of children' debate that had been fomenting in the popular media, largely under the direction of opinion leaders such as Devine.⁵ Because of this over-determination of the lines of argument and of allegiance under the rubric of child sexualisation, an opportunity

was missed to critically reflect upon such feelings of ambivalence about Henson's photographs—and what they tell us about the work ideals of childhood innocence do for *adult* formations of identity and desire.

Meanwhile, in their failure to address the discomfort provoked by Henson's work—and insistence upon the autonomy of art—his supporters pushed art to the margins, as an elite and esoteric field closed to most Australians.⁶ Needless to say, this strategy did not engender public sympathy for Henson. The newly elected Prime Minister Rudd had his finger to the pulse of public sentiment when on breakfast television he called the most controversial photograph, of a nude thirteen-year-old girl, “revolting.”⁷ The NSW Department of Public Prosecutions locked down the exhibition, with a view to building a case of child pornography against Henson. And only after the Office of Film and Literature Classification had rated even the most provocative work as ‘PG,’⁸ was it announced that no charges would be laid. It's fair to say that this ‘encounter’ between the artist, the child protection activist, the Australian public and the NSW police force generated more heat than light. The debate burned hotly and died out quickly, leaving those involved singed and shy of the public arena. The encounter was no encounter: once hostilities had run their course, art buffs returned to being aloof, and an indignant public to ‘knowing what they like.’ No space of exchange was produced, and each party was none the wiser about the other's point of view.

This paper will attempt to salvage an encounter between the concern for children's vulnerability evoked by the Henson controversy, and the critical and ethical dimensions of his work that were obscured by the moralism and “child politics”⁹ of its public reception. This encounter is framed by Walter Benjamin's seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.’ Benjamin's reflections in this piece speak to multiple aspects of the Henson affair. For instance, to what extent is an artwork political—even (and perhaps especially) where it is perceived to be outside of politics (as either ‘purely’ aesthetic, or ‘purely’ concerning children's welfare)? What significance for the reception of the work's subject is borne by the fact that it was a photograph—and so already assumes a critical, or at least complicated, relation to ‘art’? How should we interpret anxiety regarding the uncontrolled proliferation of the image, experienced by Henson's detractors and supporters alike? What is the *viewer's* responsibility when interpreting an artwork such as *Untitled (#30)*—the photograph of the girl that proved so provocative? How might we take better account of the vulnerability that the work represents? And finally, how could a more ethical critical engagement with Henson's work take place? An engagement, that is, that opens rather than closes down the potential significances and experiences emerging from the work? Let's begin with the work, before turning to Benjamin's critical apparatus through which we might make better sense of its cultural, aesthetic and political import.

I

Bill Henson was photographing children long before the Roslyn Oxley⁹ incident. He is especially interested in adolescence, and the anxiety and ambiguity of those years during which individuals negotiate the difficult passage between childhood and adulthood. This is reflected in an interview with Henson, where he states:

The reason I like working with teenagers is because they represent a kind of breach between the dimensions that people cross through. The classical root of the word “adolescence” means to grow towards something. I am fascinated with that interval, that sort of highly ambiguous and uncertain period where you have an exponential growth of experience and knowledge, but also a kind of tenuous grasp on the certainties of adult life.¹⁰

Adolescence presents many challenges related to identity and desire, and such challenges are exacerbated by adults' often-ambivalent attitudes towards teenagers—tinged as they are with disappointment about the passing of childhood.¹¹ Adolescents enter a difficult and murky territory not only on account of the exigencies of their own corporeal or psychological experience, but also because of cultural feedback they receive about what it means to be an adolescent. They bear the brunt of a social overinvestment in the notion of childhood innocence, and the danger adolescence represents signals a cultural ambivalence about our own becoming-

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adult. Adults mourn the child in the teenager, and also feel threatened by the paradoxical combination of passion, volatility and insouciance that adolescence represents.

A sympathetic viewing of Henson's body of work reveals his sensitivity to the vulnerability that attends being a teenager. His photography plays with light and shade, capturing the 'twilight' of childhood and the obscurity of the experience of being on the "cusp of adulthood."¹² The locations in which he shoots conjure what has been described as "the secluded gloom of urban wastelands, barren landscapes, and 'spellbinding, haunted spaces."¹³ These are the kinds of spaces adolescents like, and often the only places they are tolerated in groups. In "intervals in the landscape, the no man's land between one thing and another thing ... like the vacant lot between the shopping mall and the petrol station," Henson states in an interview, is where teenagers "naturally go to muck around."

Kids naturally gravitate toward that sort of interval in the landscape. I suppose, as we grow older, all those places sort of become a bit of a lost domain.¹⁴

Because Henson so ably depicts the vulnerability of being-adolescent, his work is unsettling. Especially for parents, Henson's images recruit their myriad feelings for their teenage children, including a sense of *their own* vulnerability. Through his use of telephoto lenses, Henson captures the parent's thwarted, tender protectiveness, exercised from afar—as if they were voyeurs rather than parents, because their children no longer want them near. This parenting-at-a-distance Henson so aptly represents magnifies the sense of fragility we feel towards the subjects of his work.

The image that attracted most attention in 2008 is, however, peculiarly coy compared with his earlier work on adolescence, which has a sexy, raw, almost post-apocalyptic aesthetic. David Marr, I think rightly, conjectures that the sight of transitional breasts is what so unnerved its viewers:¹⁵

Without breasts or with full breasts this image would ... have caused less fuss ... But these were budding breasts, rarely seen and almost never celebrated. In our culture budding breasts are extraordinarily private.¹⁶

The meaning attached to the model's breast 'buds' is that this is a transitory, and so vulnerable, moment of her life. She is in the ambiguous zone of 'no-longer-not-yet' that is hidden from view in our culture because, following Mary Douglas, it resists easy classification.¹⁷ Early adolescence is an "extraordinarily private" time—lived behind closed bedroom and bathroom doors—partly because during this time one metamorphoses from child to adult, and must come to terms with what that means. But perhaps more acutely in terms of the public reaction, the budding breast is private because *adults* prefer not to dwell upon the passing of childhood. The budding breast refers obliquely to a budding sexuality, and the stirrings of a desire that adults cannot control.¹⁸

Crucially, this vulnerability belongs to the artwork as well as its subjects. And the 'Henson affair' demonstrates the liability to misunderstanding such subtle and profound works suffer out of their 'proper' context. Yet the first removal from context borne by the image was at the hands of the artist himself, who insisted the invitation for the Roslyn Oxley9 opening should feature his most context-sensitive and potentially incendiary image. This depiction of such a fragile moment within an ambiguous and culturally loaded adolescence was too combustible to be routinely circulated via Australia Post to its recipients. The anxiety provoked by the image was perhaps caused in equal measure by its subject matter and the profanity of the mode of its transmission. Picking up the Henson image with the morning mail, many well versed in the codes that govern art literacy felt unsettled by it. In their homes and workplaces, without the frame of reference given by the gallery wall, they were uncertain how to interpret the work.¹⁹ The invitation reduced the image to the same level as other items of mail, such as an advertising catalogue or fashion magazine: to be consumed with one's morning coffee. It had, in short, lost the 'aura' that separates art from that more banal commercial image. Henson's use of *Untitled (#30)* was not only felt as an onslaught upon the value of childhood, then, but also revealed the vulnerability of art to its own exposure. A consideration of Walter Benjamin's essay on art may assist these reflections.

II

Benjamin wrote his touchstone analysis of the meaning of art in 1936, at a time when art had been newly deployed to mass political movements. The essay thinks through the connection between the material conditions of a work's production and distribution, and the social transformations and relationships its reception allows. Yet Benjamin was also responding to a high culture anxiety about the 'vulgarisation' of art by the turn to photography and film and a perceived need to protect art's integrity and autonomy from mass culture, as well as his own concern about the Nazis' manipulative use of film for the purposes of propaganda. For Benjamin, art technologies organise collective modes of perception—the manner in which a community experiences and evaluates its world, and potentialities for socio-political change—and for this reason they are already political.²⁰ By virtue of their inherent reproducibility and speed of development, then, photography and film were for Benjamin the most revolutionary art forms. In opening the image up to a broader reception, photography proliferates the social contexts and meanings available to interpret the work. Yet more than this, Benjamin argues that technologies of mass reproduction alter fundamentally what art can do: under these conditions, art is no longer harnessed to tradition—to the magical and esoteric realm of the monastery, court, or cave wall. With the invention of lithography, photography, and film, the nature of art shifts from that of being tied to a cult meaning, "imbedded in the fabric of tradition."²¹ These new technologies not only allow the work to proliferate, Benjamin argues, but even *demand* its mass distribution: through material imperatives (the investment in the 'template,' or film) that make economic sense only on a mass scale.

Because of its mass appeal, however, photography signals for Benjamin the destruction of what he calls art's 'aura': its connection to a material and social history, or tradition, through which it gleams its ineffable uniqueness.²² As George Markus suggests, for Benjamin this aura "is not an immanent quality of this object but a particular experiential relation of the subject to it, a form of its apperception."²³ By means of this relation, aura bestows upon the art object a sense of distance and otherworldliness that nevertheless also provokes a feeling of presence. The 'distance' through which the work's aura had held us in its thrall, however, is closed by technologies of mechanical reproduction—enabling each to bring the image near: "to get hold of the object... by way of its likeness."²⁴ The photographic work is transitory and egalitarian where the painting was unique and permanent. The painting's aura was commensurate with its being *hidden* from the many, its meaning and value bound up with the ritualistic practices and conventions guarding access to it. Today the public exhibition of the work in galleries and museums attempts to produce aura and distance through its own set of ritualistic restrictions: the respectful hush, the opening hours, the boundaries that oblige spectators to keep back from the work, the ubiquity of security guards who signal that art is valuable, and police the limits of our interaction with it. But despite this creation of 'artificial scarcity,' faith in art-for-art's-sake, and celebrations of artistic genius, these are only funereal monuments to art's aura: the value of art is already hollowed out, leveled by the market, and haunted by the question of authenticity. We now experience art differently because, for Benjamin, its context has shifted from esoteric cult to public exhibition and from auratic to spectacular. In the wake of new technologies, aura would seem to be but the fetish of a would-be aristocracy (and public suspicion against residual elitism in the world of art may, indeed, be well founded).

Technologies of mass reproduction undo the value of art, but in so doing bring it into a new use, with new potentialities. Art is liquidated in order to prepare for what Benjamin calls its "exposed resurrection."²⁵ Yet importantly, such a resurrection implies risk as well as possibility. On the one hand, it enables a distraction of affect from 'the political' that verges towards fascism. Benjamin had rightly feared that aesthetic reifications of tradition—'kitsch' objects and ideals mobilised in film—would effectively assist the Nazi party to commandeer all sense of community in Germany.²⁶ Technology destabilises tradition, and both 'ends' of the cultural spectrum resist this move: emissaries of 'high culture' make melancholic appeal to an 'aura' only discovered at the moment of its disappearance; and 'low culture' invents kitsch—ornaments and household knick-knacks that crudely and sentimentally represent an older order. As Goebbels was aware, kitsch is more successful than *art pour l'art* in recruiting a nostalgia for tradition: it takes up the new technology ironically—holding in suspension the juxtaposition between new technology and old art forms—and thus is able to harness sentiment to a radical,

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yet backward-looking, politics.

On the other hand, for Benjamin, art's "exposed resurrection" through new technologies promises a more democratic mode of *critical* cultural engagement than had been afforded by previous modes of creativity. He held film especially to have the potential to explode undemocratic propensities of more traditional forms such as painting, which tends to individualise and separate subjects from one another—received as it is in quiet and solitary contemplation. The invention of film, conversely, enabled a *communal* experience of art to take place, unlimited by class or cultural propriety. In so doing, film and photography brought to bear a cultural unconscious, revealing moments of everyday life that traditional art forms could not disclose.²⁷ The democratic event immanent to technologies of mass reproduction, then, involved the interpretation, or critique, of film and photography. The role of the critic is to bring into the sphere of public cultural analysis structures, values, and ways of life that would otherwise persist beyond the reach of consciousness.²⁸ Aesthetic practice is thus inherently political, for Benjamin, and how the community responds to new technologies will continue to shape its political potentialities.

These dangers and possibilities brought about, according to Benjamin, by art's mass reception bear upon the Henson controversy in unexpected ways. For a great part of the tension that emerged in relation to the work was the ease of its distribution on the Internet—which is not only the newest mass technology, but is also widely viewed as precipitating the erosion of tradition and community (significantly, through an emphasis on the dangers it apparently poses to children).²⁹ First, pundits, police and politicians whipped up alarm that Henson's photograph could be so readily accessed by paedophiles—from the gallery's website, and later after its proliferation on news sites.³⁰ Next, Henson's defenders countered that it was the moral panic itself that generated the salacious buzz about the image, as well as its ubiquitous Internet presence.³¹ Yet beneath this discussion was a deeper anxiety, shared by all vocal parties, about the proper context of the work. Both anti- and pro-Henson camps engaged in attempts to circumscribe its meaning, and to limit its interpretation: While the moralisers attempted to use the law to classify the image as pornographic, framing the photograph as such with black bars and pixilation;³² the more artistically informed were anxious to restrict viewing of the photograph to gallery spaces, with the auratic proxies that signal the work's sublimity, or distance from the everyday.

The former uses art politically, but by concealing the image's political significance within a moralising appeal to the sanctity of childhood. The latter attempts to remove the work from the political arena altogether, and thus retreats to the refuge of 'art for art's sake.'

To realise the full political potential of the work's open distribution, we may need to return to the status of the work as *photographic* art. For Benjamin, by destroying the distance through which art once procured its auratic value, photography also gives rise to an investment in everydayness through which a cult of domesticity is created. I quote at length from "A Short History of Photography":

Finally ... the ranks of the professional photographer were invaded on all sides by businessmen, and when subsequently the practice of touching up the negative became widespread (the bad painter's revenge on photography), a sharp decline in taste set in. This was the period of the thick photograph album. Its favoured location was the most chill part of the house, on pier or pedestal tables in the drawing-room. Leatherbound, embossed with metal mounts, it sported upon its gold-rimmed, fingerthick pages absurdly draped or laced figures—uncle Alex and Aunt Riekchen, Trudchen when she was little, Father in his first term at university—and finally, to crown the shame, ourselves: as drawing-room Tyroleans, yodeling and waving hats against a background of painted snow peaks or as spruce sailors, leaning one leg straight, the other bent, as is proper, against a polished door-jamb. The accessories of such portraits, the pedestals, the balustrades and diminutive oval tables still recall the time when, due to the long exposure, the subject required supports in order to remain still. If at the beginning one made do with *headrests* or *kneesupports*, other accessories soon followed, such as were to be found in famous paintings and which therefore had to be *artistic*.³³

Once the preserve of the sacred, technologies of mass reproduction turned art's attention to the lives of ordinary people, not only saturating their environments with miniatures of the great works, but also through the depiction of quotidian subjects and scenes, arranged in citation of the exotic or exalted world to which art was once attached. Through this turn, the most ordinary life of the masses attracts a cult value, through kitsch: the marrying together of the old and new, the cheap and the priceless, the useful and its surplus value. In particular, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the dispersal of art within the domicile produced the pampered, sentimentalised child as the centre of the bourgeois household, and a trinket of middle-class sensibility. The child was imbued with an aesthetic, kitsch significance still evident in contemporary representations of children: in advertising and entertainment media, greetings cards, and popular prints. Through the domestication of art, then, the child has become the site of both cultic value, and cultural crisis.

The destinies of art and of childhood innocence cross paths through photography. And the Henson affair discloses what is at stake in this fateful encounter.

III

The appeal some of Henson's defenders make to the autonomy of art appears curious, because this autonomy, according to Benjamin, is precisely what the materiality of photography undoes. As we have seen, Benjamin was critical of attempts to preserve art's autonomy against the threat of new technologies. Indeed, as Winifried Menninghaus writes,

For Benjamin there can no longer be any question of art being 'autonomous.' Ever since it ceased to be faster and more advanced than the technical devices in everyday use, art finds itself in the increasingly precarious situation of having to react to technological developments.³⁴

It is interesting, in this context, that arguments for the auratic quality of Henson's work refer to the 'old-tech' materiality of its production: that he works with gelatin film, and with photochemicals that, in the digital age, are sometimes difficult to procure. Given that, for Benjamin, aura is only apprehended at the point of its disappearance, it seems relevant that a nostalgia for techniques presently on the wane should give rise to a sense of aura. This would be to trivialise the experience of aura for these critics, however. Perhaps more germane to this experience is Greg Hainge's observation that, in his work, Henson "retains the processual nature of the fix and the temporality of the image,"³⁵ thus undoing the presumed 'indexicality' of photography: the assumption a focus on technology engenders, that the work is a simple re-presentation of its object, completed within the shutter-speed fraction of time it takes light to hit film.³⁶ Hainge emphasises the *process* by which Henson creates his work, and the artistry that takes place in the darkroom as decisions and interpretations emerge from a range of possible destinies of any given work.³⁷ Henson's work is precisely *not* reproducible, then, as the method of its fabrication endows it with a uniqueness and distance. This process connects Henson's work to a deeper temporality grounded in artistic practice that, we could add, Benjamin might call 'tradition.'

The new technology that Henson encountered—and with which, according to Benjamin, he is obliged as an artist to keep pace—is the internet, which controlled the destiny of his work's public reception more surely than the subtle agitations that brought the image into its smoky aura. Through that medium the image (in contrast to 'the work') *was* reproducible, and indeed seemed unlimitedly so. And through the distribution of the image engendered by the internet, it became patently political. To seek refuge in artistic autonomy would be to miss an opportunity: for, Henson's work *does* speak to a more general issue of the representation of children, the place of such representation in our cultural reality in general, and our anxieties pertaining to it.

Likewise, Miranda Devine and others protesting against the image insisted upon the autonomy of *childhood*, and a curious aura and otherworldliness of the 'child,' who must be protected from the adult economy, adult desire, and the representation that drives both. By notionally (but not actually) elevating childhood beyond political concerns, and treating it as a cult, Devine exalts childhood beyond the sphere of ordinary life. Bill

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Henson's exhibition happened to take place in the midst of heated debate in the Australian media over the perceived 'sexualisation' of children in advertising, and so was filed under that rubric.³⁸ For this reason Henson was compared with corporations who profit from children's exploitation: children ought to be represented only according to distinct parameters, was the claim. And the political effects of those parameters themselves—the kitsch representation of children as pure, passive, and pet-like—remain unexamined. This aesthetic autonomy accorded to childhood limits the *political* autonomy of actual children (whose opinions about Henson's photographs were never solicited).³⁹ The reduction of childhood to idyllic innocence, and of children's interests to a need of protection, serves to fetishise their vulnerability. Children's liability to harm and adults' ability to protect them become prized cultural traits in the name of 'innocence.' And in turn, the fetishisation of children's vulnerability enables adults to repudiate their own, as fears and anxieties associated with contemporary life (health, money, work, relationships) are projected onto children.

What's interesting about *Untitled* (#30) is the way it stages the *multiple* vulnerabilities at stake in present debates about the representation of children, adults relation of desire to them, and the social role of art. The image is a powerful site of critique, enacting not only the passing of childhood in its subject, but also a crisis in the cultural value of childhood, and a renegotiation of the value of art.

In approaching this critical nexus let's begin with childhood, which owes its premium cultural value at least in part to the invention of technologies of mechanical reproduction. In replacing religious and courtly traditions, the middle-class proxy for aura has been the domestic sphere of enjoyment—a space that is both adorned with and celebrated through new art forms. Childhood epitomises this hallowed sphere, and so is a choice subject for contemporary practices of representation (photography, film and television). The rise of genre art in the late eighteenth century signals the first investments of cultural value into an aesthetic of innocent childhood. Paintings such as Thomas Gainsborough's 'The Blue Boy' (1770) and Joshua Reynolds's 'Portrait of Penelope Boothby' (1788) first represent an *ineffable something* about the child *as* 'child,' and so we gain access to this 'childhood' by means of the work of art. The popular appeal of genre painting led to further developments. As Benjamin acutely observes, in the interest of cost effectiveness, cheap manufacturing processes such as lithography led to the easy mass production of images, and there was an economic interest in doing so.⁴⁰ It is also significant that lithography chiefly mobilised scenes of domesticity to the purpose of advertising. The popular Pears Soap advertisements that extended from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, for instance, relied chiefly on descriptions of children, observed as if in secret, safely ensconced in the privacy of the bathroom. Not only did we buy the soap, we were also sold the idea of what our domesticity should look like; and these images now adorn the walls of middle-class bathrooms (thus closing the circuit between the representation of the home and the selling of products).⁴¹ We can then observe a connection between the materiality of mass art-production, the cultivation of bourgeois art-appreciation, and the development of mass markets. It is a course that makes its way through the figure of childhood.

Those debates about mass media's exploitation of children in which Henson was embroiled in 2008 indicate a mounting queasiness about the relationship between representation, childhood, money, and desire. 'New media' of Benjamin's time, such as lithography, photography and film, may have *produced* the cult value of childhood, but they also increasingly *undermine* such value. Because these technologies reproduced such apparently 'truthful' images of children so effortlessly, a historically situated ideal of childhood was naturalised. We came to believe in a rarefied existence of childhood, or the autonomy of childhood from everyday life. The better to approximate art's lost aura, childhood was enclosed within a limited context and placed at a distance from all things political. Images of children in advertising now appear vulgar and exploitative as disenchantment with late capitalism—and the exploitation upon which it is built—is increasingly patent. Advertisements are losing their 'reality effect,' and so confront us with contemporary childhood's abject origin. Within the field of representation childhood has become a volatile article: For the child is supposed to connect the household to an aura of tradition and virtue, but also signifies the destruction of aura through the cultural elevation of (mundane) middle-class family life. Childhood innocence is seen to be vulnerable in this context because it stands in for a value its very existence destroys. It is, in Freud's terms, a fetish: an illusion that substitutes for a

lack. And as such childhood is an unstable ideal.⁴²

Henson's *Untitled* (#30) confronts the viewer with the child's vulnerability so starkly that they are forced to countenance their own fetishistic desire for innocent childhood. What they find in this 'showground mirror,' however, is the spectre of the paedophile, understood as a reified and radicalised portion of a more ordinary adult desire for the ideal of childhood.⁴³ Henson refers to and critiques the conventions of presenting childhood innocence as a lure for adult desire: conventions first forged in art, but refined in the earliest, most earnest forms of advertising. The ambivalence and experience of discomfort provoked by the photograph should prompt reflection on the presumed 'naturalness' of these conventions, as well as their precariousness. For the difference between a well executed, 'iconic' image of innocent childhood and an image prone to charges of pornography is slight. What separates Bill Henson from Anne Geddes, for instance, is the absence or presence of sentimentality. Geddes's photographs are what Benjamin referred to as 'kitsch': they prolong a relationship with outmoded values and traditions that Henson's images liquidise, and allow us to critique. Geddes's images of children are kitsch because they tap into our most "threadbare and timeworn" notions about children. The images she provides contain unconscious, dream-like remnants of these comfortable, slumbering thoughts. "[W]hich side does an object turn toward dreams?," Benjamin writes in "Dream Kitsch," and responds, "It is the side worn through by habit and patched with cheap maxims. The side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch."⁴⁴

Kitsch provides a cheap sense of tradition, and of communal belonging, which can be manipulated easily for political gain. It allows us to remain unconscious of the fantasy, or dream, that organises material (and political) relations. The sentimentality of Geddes's dream-kitsch sugarcoats vulnerability, framing the child in the trimmings of adult supervision. Geddes reassures us of the presence of the 'good' adult, by surrounding the naked child with citations of nursery rhymes or fairytales—thus embedding them in adult fantasies of childhood. The spectator of the Geddes image is then allowed to enjoy the sensuousness of the child's body with impunity, because it is mediated by symbols of innocence. Desire for the child—which is organised by this fairytale fantasy—is permitted by this dream-like arrangement of children in flowerpots, bunny suits, or their tenuous placement (like Thumbelina) upon a giant leaf. We are not supposed to inquire into the material conditions of these photographs: how, for instance, these children were persuaded to sit still, or sleep, or stay awake.

Conversely, the naked child in Henson's photograph embarrasses adults' desire for children, by waking us from the dream Geddes exemplifies. If one feels watched by disapproving others while viewing *Untitled* (#30), it is because the image is not assimilated to the innocence cult. It permits the viewer no place to hide, and does not finesse the desire for youth and beauty. Adam Geczy provides a way into understanding the unsettling effect of Henson's untitled image:

(good) art is always attempting to be 'real.' This real is frequently not immediately recognisable because it is not a literal or sanctioned transposition of what occurs. Paradoxically, this real is a metaphor that actualises and divulges the essence of its referent. It can be confrontingly hideous, distorted, or so complex as to be embodied in what we glean from an abstract form. In the process art has always assumed the role of challenging assumed norms of beauty.⁴⁵

The 'real' Geczy describes concerns a critical relation Henson's image establishes to the fantasy of childhood innocence. The "hideous" aspect of the photograph reveals the structure of desire through which a more quotidian 'reality' is established. Thus, it addresses itself to the social imaginary—or dream—through which our perceptions are ordered. Because Henson's image reveals the viewer's obscure identification with the paedophile—the dream vexed to nightmare of a desire for the child, in which we invest a sense of 'community'—the photograph forces either a violent repudiation (Rudd's "revolting!"), or critical contemplation of the entire field of childhood innocence. *Untitled* (#30) wakes us in fright from a fantasy, and an aesthetic, that not only fashions contemporary experience, but also enables a political use of the figure of the child. The photograph brings to issue our everyday use of children, and thereby breaks the illusion that structures contemporary

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configurations of desire.

For this reason Henson's photograph should also prompt a reconsideration of the public role of art. Whatever violence the furor over Henson's exhibition may have done to its intended reception, the reproduction of the photograph in the print and electronic media opened it to audiences that otherwise would never have seen it. The redeployment of Henson's art work to this new media gave it a new life, and a second flight, which would have been denied it were the photograph confined to the auratic sphere of the gallery (where viewers were less likely to have felt its unsettling effects). And although this destiny of the work was unexpected, it was also, at the outset, 'authorised' by Henson, who exposed that work for the purpose of advertising his exhibition. With this wider distribution, the meaning of the work was also dispersed and rendered out of control, no longer contained by standard practices of exhibition. As Walter Benjamin continues to show us, however, art is no longer an arcane practice, but is meaningful insofar as it can be criticised.

Notwithstanding Henson's undoubted artistry—and his use of what are now outdated technologies—the very medium of his work places it within a trajectory that had already participated in a challenge to traditional ideas about art. Its distribution over the Internet compounded this anxiety about art's 'vocation.' Yet the photograph also engages a critical relation to the fantasy of childhood innocence, by revealing its uncanny, horrifying aspect: the desire through which the perceived 'reality' of childhood is established. Those who most *desire* 'innocence,' conceived as a fetishised vulnerability, are likely to be extremely confronted by what the photograph reveals about this desire. Depicting as it does the passing of childhood, the photograph continues to unsettle the viewer, and to challenge their own attachment to the idea that children should remain free of political interest and desire, even when it is their own. The dream from which *Untitled (#30)* awakens its public concerns the illusion that childhood innocence is not itself already political. Henson's work reveals that art *is political*, just as beauty and morality are political. And through contemplation of art images such as Henson's, we can begin to imagine what a childhood that thwarts our received aesthetic of innocence might look like.

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NOTES

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2. Miranda Devine, "Moral backlash over sexing up of our children," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 May 2008: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/moral-backlash-over-sexing-up-of-our-children/2008/05/21/1211182891875.html> (last accessed 19 July 2010). The academic Abigail Bray argues along similar lines as Devine, albeit in subtler and more context-sensitive terms, in "Governing the Gaze: Child Sexual Abuse Moral Panics and the Post-Feminist Blindspot," *Feminist Media Studies* 9[2] (2009): 173-91, and "The Question of Intolerance: 'Corporate Paedophilia' and Child Sexual Abuse Moral Panics," *Australian Feminist Studies, Special Issue: The Child* 23[57] (2008): 323-41. Robbie Duschinsky offers a complex and insightful reading of Bray's work in "Feminism, Sexualisation and Social Status," *Media International Australia, Special Issue: Children, Young People, Sexuality and the Media*, Catharine Lumby and Katherine Albury (eds), Issue 135 (May 2010): 94-105.
3. The expansion of the scope of child pornography laws in the US since the 1980s especially has led to more scrutiny of artists' representations of children—and particularly photography, the realism of which is seen to enact abuse against children more directly than painted or sculptural representations. Sally Mann's photographs of her own children, for instance, have drawn censure, as have those of Denise Marika, and in Britain, Tierney Gearon. See Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998): 159-92; Sarah Edge and Gail Baylis, "Photographing Children: the Works of Tierney Gearon and Sally Mann," *Visual Culture in Britain* 5[1] (Summer 2004): 75-89.
4. In a press release, the Australia Council articulated this view as follows: "Bill Henson is widely recognised as one of Australia's foremost visual artists, with a stellar international reputation, and his full body of work should be viewed in this context." See http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/news_items/australia_council_comments_on_bill_henson_affair (last accessed 22 April 2009).
5. See Devine's "Moral backlash over sexing up of our children," cited above, which provides a rough genealogy of the debate about sexualisation. This debate has arguably shaped the Australian media's manner of imagining childhood over the past five years, and certainly played a large role in framing the Henson controversy.
6. Speaking to some in the art community, however, there was far more nuance, variety and ambivalence amongst artists and art critics in their opinions on the exhibition. This indicates the homogenising pressure upon a public stance that a moral panic can exert upon a beleaguered sub-community.
7. 'Rudd Revolted,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* online at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/nude-photographs-revolting-rudd/2008/05/23/1211183044543.html> (last accessed 23 April 2009).
8. The Office of Film and Literature Classification stipulates that items "classified PG may contain material which some children find confusing or upsetting, and may require the guidance of parents or guardians." Cited by Young Media Australia at http://www.youngmedia.org.au/codes/classifications_films.htm (last accessed 27 May 2009).
9. 'Child politics' designates the mobilisation of the figure of the child, as ultimately vulnerable, to produce fear and urgency in the community, and thereby achieve particular political goals. An effect of child politics is that issues determined by deeply political circumstances are de-politicised, and bi-partisan support invoked, for a goal that does not necessarily have positive outcomes for children. Barbara Baird discusses child politics as guest editor for a special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* on "The Child," 23[57] (September 2008).
10. Quoted in Sidhu: http://www.egothemag.com/archives/2005/08/bill_henson.htm (last accessed 20 May 2009).
11. This reluctance to contemplate the passing of childhood is related to an investment in the *idea* of childhood. The 'child' is reduced, in the common imagination, to one *without worldly experience or desire*: a passive object of *others'* protection, abuse and control. It is thus difficult for some to conceptualise the transition to the activity and knowledge of adulthood. And this is especially so concerning *sexual* activity and knowledge. In view of this, Henson's photography is particularly disturbing for some adults.
12. See text for his 'Twilight: Photography in The Magic Hour' collection at Victoria and Albert Museum: http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/photography/past_exhns/twilight/henson/index.html (last accessed 20 May 2009).
13. Dennis Cooper, *Pavement Magazine*, issue 3: <http://www.pavementmagazine.com/billhenson.html> (last accessed 20 May 2009).
14. Quoted in Sidhu.
15. Miranda Devine briefly refers to the model's "budding breasts of puberty" in her first missive, published the day of the exhibition's opening, 'Moral Backlash Over Sexing Up of Our Children,' at <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/moral-backlash-over-sexing-up-of-our-children-20080521-2gts.html> (last accessed 29 May 2009).
16. David Marr, *The Henson Case* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2008), 5.
17. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 3.
18. It is important to note with regard to the reception of this photograph, too that vulnerability is gendered feminine. Images of a boy in early adolescence did not provoke the same response, although he was equally liable to abuse by Henson, were

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there any.

19. For instance, David Marr describes a colleague's reaction on receiving the invitation as an art critic for *The Age* as ambivalent, noting that he even kept it facedown on his desk. See Marr, *The Henson Case*, 4.
20. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.' *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): §III, 222.
21. *Ibid.*, 223.
22. Benjamin of 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' that is. As Carolin Duttlinger argues, however, Benjamin wavered on the status of photography throughout his writings, arguing elsewhere for certain auratic experiences through photographic portraiture, and especially the daguerreotype (for which the long exposure time would give the subject a dreamy, meditative quality), through which the uniqueness of the photographed subject is conveyed. See Carolin Duttlinger, "Imaginary Encounters: Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography," *Poetics Today* 29[1] (2008): 79-101.
23. George Markus, "Benjamin's Critique of Aesthetic Autonomy" in (eds) Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice, *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* (Melbourne, re.press: 2009), 118.
24. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art,' 223.
25. Benjamin quoting Abel Gance, *ibid.*, 222.
26. For an extended discussion of the place of kitsch and low culture in Benjamin's critique, see Winifred Menninghaus, "On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad Taste'," *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* (Melbourne, re.press: 2009), 39-57.
27. Benjamin writes in "The Work of Art":

The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed dimensions of depth in a conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analysable things which ad heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception. It is only an obverse of this fact that behavior items shown in a movie can be analyzed much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or on the stage. As compared with painting, filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because of its incomparably more precise statements of the situation ... The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (235-37).

And in "A Short History of Photography,"

However skilful the photographer, however carefully he poses his model, the spectator feels and irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it. It is indeed a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one which addresses the eye; different above all in the sense that instead of a space worked through by a human consciousness there appears one which is affected unconsciously. It is possible, for example, however roughly, to describe the way somebody walks, but it is impossible to say anything about that fraction of a second when a person *starts to walk*. Photography with its various aids (lenses, enlargements) can reveal this moment. (Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" (translated by Stanley Mitchell), *Screen*, 13[1] (1972): 7)

28. Importantly, what Benjamin traces here is the movement of art into popular culture, and artists from Chaplin to Warhol (and, for Benjamin, chiefly the Surrealists) have engaged with popular culture in creative and provocative ways. The role of the art critic in this setting becomes political once art is a general feature of mass culture: it is the task of deciphering and interpreting the encrypted 'dream-work' of a community.
29. In the last decade, the threat posed to children by the internet has been a frequently cited trope in popular media. Online predation by paedophiles, peer-bullying, and exposure to pornographic or inappropriate material are three common complaints against online media, and governments have constantly wavered between online content regulation, providing filtering software to households, and enforcing filtering of online material at the level of Internet Service Providers (ISPs). In Australia, both Liberal and Labor governments have either introduced or attempted to introduce internet censorship legislation widely criticised both domestically and internationally. See Peter Chen, "Lust, Greed, Sloth: The Performance and Potential of Internet Co-Regulation in Australia," *Griffith Law Review* 11[2], 2002; and "Time to turn the page on net filtering," *Online Opinion* (17 March 2009): <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=8668> (last accessed 28 April 2010).
30. <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/charges-on-child-porn-art/story-0-1111116421110> (last accessed 25 November

2009).

31. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/fullfrontal-attack/2008/05/30/1211654306570.html?page=fullpage> (last accessed 25 November 2009).

32. As Edge and Baylis write regarding a similar case in the UK, "This 'blacking out' visually confirms, if not actually constructs, the 'offensive' nature of the photographs." See "Photographing Children," 76.

33. Benjamin, "Short History," 17-18. Emphases in original.

34. Menninghaus, "On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch," 52.

35. Greg Hainge, "Unfixing the Photographic Image: Photography, Indexicality, Fidelity and Normativity," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22[5] (2008): 724.

36. The view Hainge criticises is largely represented by Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), and is also summarised in the John Berger essay "Understanding a Photograph," in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.) *Critical Essays on Photography* (Stony Creek, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980): 291-95.

37. Hainge quotes Isabel Crombie:

Henson's intensive but subtle processing and toning removes much of the extraneous detail that ties the photograph too immediately to its origins. The reworking of the print subverts another notable characteristic of photography: its promise of infinite reproduction. By his processing technique – which involves the hand agitation of developing fluid over the paper to create a smoky appearance that differs slightly in each work – Henson suggests that the unique amalgam of chemistry and the artist's intervention results in a finished print unlike any other that may be made. (Crombie 1995, 382, quoted in Hainge, 726).

See Isabel Crombie, (1995) *Bill Henson, 46th Biennale of Venice*, Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency Ltd, Melbourne. Reproduced in *Mnemosyne*, ed. B. Henson, 382 – 4. Zurich/Sydney: Scalo/Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005.

38. Much of this contention can be traced to The Australia Institute report, *Corporate Paedophilia*, which, in turn, took that phrase from the ponderous ABC broadcaster Phillip Adams. The debate then moved into the pages of the major daily newspapers, before sparking a Senate inquiry ("Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media") in 2008. See Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia*, Discussion Paper Number 90, October 2006, The Australia Institute: <https://www.tai.org.au/file.php?file=DP90.pdf> (last accessed 13 December 2010). See also my account of what animates this anxiety, "The Innocence Fetish: Reflections on the Commodification and Sexualisation of Children in the Media and Popular Culture." *Media International Australia, Special Issue: Children, Young People, Sexuality and the Media*, Catharine Lumby and Katherine Albury (eds), Issue 135 (May 2010): 106-17.

39. See Kylie Valentine, "Innocence defiled, again? The art of Bill Henson and the welfare of children," *Australian Review of Public Affairs* (June 2008): <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2008/06/valentine.html> (last accessed 21 May 2009).

40. Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," n. 7, 244.

41. For more on the production of advertising art and its connection to the advent of 'childhood,' see Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*.

42. For Freud fetishisation also assumes a sexual connotation: where something not usually associated with sex is sexualised. For Freud, when a child realises the mother lacks a penis, the object of his focus immediately before this realisation is invested with sexual energy—thus he is able to preserve the phallic mother. For Marx, conversely, commodity fetishisation refers to the occlusion of concrete relations through which the commodity is produced, and the diversion of affect that would attend these relations onto the commodity itself. In each case, the object is exalted above ordinary materiality.

43. Although paedophiles certainly pose a threat to children, the degree to which their presence is feared is disproportionate to the actual risk. Notably in the case of the Henson controversy, the mere possibility that—somewhere, sometime—a paedophile might have access to the image (and that this possibility was radically increased by its distribution online), induced a sense of panic about the security of childhood itself. Such a response seems indicative of a more general cultural anxiety about that ideal.

44. Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism," (translated by Howard Eiland) *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1927-1934, Michael W. Jennings et al (ed.) (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3.

45. A. Geczy. 'Humbert or Humbug?' *Art Monthly Australia* 211 (July 2008): 11.