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**Juvenile Desires: The Child as Subject, Object, and Mise-en-Scène
In Contemporary American Culture**

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in Contemporary American Culture**

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For Sandra and Douglas McKittrick

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**Casey Douglas McKittrick, Ph.D.
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Supervisors: Ann Cvetkovich and Janet Staiger

Scholarship on the cultural status of the child in America has taken diverse and fruitful forms, yet there exists a significant ellipsis within theories of filmic spectatorship regarding cinematic children. This study engages the child figure's relation to the cinematic apparatus and analyzes spectator responses to the child's presentation as a desiring subject and desired object. Within contemporary American culture, the child figure generates at once a *mise-en-scène* of desire and a *mise-en-abîme* of potential stigmatization, self-abjection and shame. The vexed relation to the image of the child that characterizes the contemporary adult citizen and, more pointedly, the adult spectator, is a symptom of the contradictory discourses of childhood at play in contemporary American media and within its political bodies. The Columbine shootings, the murder of child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey, the Catholic Church scandals, many well-publicized child abductions, and countless occurrences over the past decade have produced a climate of moral panic over children's endangerment. Yet, more than ever, the eroticization of children's bodies has inundated cinematic and other media productions, generating anxieties within the adult spectator concerning the propriety of gazing at children.

Juvenile Desires suggests that the dissonances produced by the contradictory signposts of moral panic and sexual objectification have too often given rise to a homophobically polarizing model of the adult spectator: on the one hand, the ostensibly heterosexual spectator whose relation to the child image is aesthetically distanced, moral, and nostalgic; and on the other, a perverse, likely homosexual spectator whose relation is libidinal, regressive, and genitally oriented. As a theoretical intervention and a reception study, this dissertation examines the term pedophilia as one both culturally over-determined and critically under-investigated. The deployment of the term pedophilia has the rhetorical effect of reducing the complex relations sustained among adult spectators and children to a space of inarticulate abjection or criminality. The dissertation proposes that a deconstructive queer theory can unsettle the recalcitrant association of pedophilia with homosexual pathology, and thereby afford a complex and nuanced account of the roles cinematic children play in generating visual and narrative pleasure across gendered and sexually oriented subject positions.

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INTRODUCTION

Henry Jenkins, in his prefatory remarks to his anthology *The Children's Culture Reader*, teases out the two predominant rhetorical figures that mark politically partisan discussions of the child in America. Republican parlance, he says, tends to situate the child within a metaphorical fort always under attack. Within the ideology of family values, "the innocent child is most often figured in relation to the past, threatened by the prospect of unregulated change, endangered by modernity, and denied things previous generations took for granted."¹ He points out that the dominating metaphor of the Democratic agenda, delivered through Hillary Clinton's appropriation of an Afrocentric pedagogical proverb, is that of the village. According to Jenkins, the village "with its evocation of the organic communities of small-town American life, depends upon the historic linkage of childhood innocence to pastoralism (an image that can be traced back to Rousseau and the Romantics)."²

A fort under siege, a disbanded village—these two images produce a sense of the child as currently displaced. For both political parties, American childhood is in the wrong place at the wrong time. The metaphors discussed here encapsulate so much of the sentiment surrounding the politicized situation of American children and the adult citizen-subject's relation to them. Regardless of the conversation—be it drug abuse, childhood sexuality, eating disorders, teen violence—the consensus is that America is losing or has lost its children.

Indeed, the mid- to late-1990s saw American culture's precipitous fall into a tremendous moral panic around the issue of the nation's children. Not since the Anita Bryant "Save Our Children" campaign of the late seventies have the protection and preservation of America's youth been so consistently and ardently focused in the eye of the media, legislature, and the judicial system. The physical, emotional, and spiritual violation of the American child has risen to the fore of the cultural imaginary, and every institution in the nation has had its part in insisting on its alarming reality.

Popular social scientific inquiries into the state of America's youth began emerging mid-decade with the widely received publication of Mary Pipher's 1994 *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. The study sought to account for the pressing and wide-spread epidemic of depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders faced by so many pre-adolescent and teenage girls in America. Its primary claim is that popular culture and media forms are the source of girls' distorted self-image and that more intimate involvement with family could counteract the deleterious effects of toxic media representation. Two popular books about boys followed to join the dialogue about the condition of America's youth. William Pollack's 1998 *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* addresses the conflicting models of masculinity that boys confront daily and suggests that models of male stoicism, independence, and aggressiveness cultivated by scouting culture and other social institutions of the early twentieth century do not best serve boys in their quest for a comfortable and healthy masculinity. Daniel Kindlon and Michael Thompson's 1999 *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* barely preceded the barrage of child-

on-child school violence, occurring mainly among white middle-class youth. It hypothesizes that boys are forced too early to abandon close ties to their mothers, resulting in emotional atrophy, the denial of proper avenues for emotive self-expression, and consequently often aggressive and selfish behavior.³

Around the time of these publications came the onset of a series of school shootings, the sensational accounts of which littered national newspapers and television shows. The shootings elicited questions from the media not unlike those laid out in the aforementioned books. While instances of inner-city violence within schools and neighborhoods were hardly a new phenomenon at the moment of the Columbine High School massacre in April of 1997, the media identified it and the subsequent incidents in Arkansas, Georgia, and the like as a radically new social epidemic, ignoring the racial implications of their characterization—namely, the implication that only white children are valuable enough to have the loss of their lives register as a national incident.

Also receiving a formidable amount of coverage in national media was the 1996 murder of six-year-old child beauty pageant star JonBenet Ramsey at her home in Boulder, Colorado. The affluent Ramsey family, who for the past nine years has been repeatedly and alternately implicated in and exonerated of her murder, became embroiled in a lengthy, gothically rendered, and highly publicized hub of speculation surrounding their involvement in the child's death, as well as their involvement in promoting their daughter as a sexual object. The fast and furious proliferation of images of JonBenet in gaudy contest regalia elicited a long-lasting and ambivalent fascination with her in mainstream media. The specularization of the child's body, coupled with the eerie and

obfuscated narrative of her death, generated a wave of "social issues" television; talk shows focused on the ethical dimensions of parental involvement in youth beauty culture (and, of course, capitalized on the spectacle of the pageants themselves). Questions about the eroticization of children, the pageant industry as enforced child labor, and the meaningfulness of children's consensual participation in beauty culture came to the fore in talk radio, primetime news specials, documentaries, and magazine features.

In 1999, eight-year-old Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez drew national attention for his "rescue" in Florida and became the momentary subject of controversy around nationalist sentiment and child endangerment. The struggle over American policy regarding citizenship and deportation, as well as over child welfare policy became condensed in the spectacular image on *Time* magazine's cover featuring Elian clutching a Mickey Mouse doll and swathed in an American flag. Janet Reno's decision to remove Elian forcefully from his American custodians at gunpoint was indicted nationally for its message about how children are valued according to their relationship to the nation.

The idea of child endangerment within larger American social institutions has run rampant, finding its expression in the litigation of James Dale vs. the Boy Scouts of America in 1999, in which Dale sued to be reinstated in the Scouts after being dismissed for being gay, and subsequent maneuvers concerning the revocation of public space, funding and other resources from the exclusive organization. The question of gay mentoring and role models has extended beyond discussions of scout leaders and has become the focus of fierce legal action regarding GLBT foster care and adoption practices. Cable television network Nickelodeon in Spring 2002 generated a great deal of

fury in the media for deciding to broadcast an hour-long special directed at children introducing them to the idea of gay parenting. The special featured former talk show host Rosie O' Donnell, who recently left her television career, came out as a lesbian, and is devoting her future to fighting for GLBT rights regarding foster care and adoption.

Legislative initiatives in states like Florida and Oklahoma have superseded concerns of queer influence on the immediate family unit, seeking to root out queer teachers and pediatricians from their respective professions; Eve Sedgwick anticipated moves like this in her 1993 essay "Queer and Now," when she wrote of "the systematic separation of children from queer adults; their systematic sequestration from the truth about the lives, culture, and sustaining relations of adults they know who may be queer" (*Tendencies 2*). Much more recently, the turmoil over the corruption of children by priests within the Catholic Church has spawned a panic over the presence of erotic endangerment around childhood even in the most highly regarded institutions of faith and worship.

Finally, the American academy, purportedly a space for liberal exchange of ideas and information, has come under attack for what has been perceived as irresponsible talk about children and sexuality. University of Missouri-Kansas City professor Harris Mirkin has had the funding for his salary revoked by the state legislature based on his publication asserting that adult-child relations should be discussed openly rather than immediately condemned based on an overly emotional reaction. The fact that he cited transhistorical and transcultural instances of structurally facilitated adult-child relationships—a claim not uncommon in anthropological or historical research—became

the grounds for the legislature's punitive action. The Missouri state legislature released the following statement to sum up their 102-29 position: "Questions about whether pedophilia is evil is not something that should be discussed on the taxpayer's dime."⁴ This last legislative action perhaps reveals most convincingly the fever-pitch of sentiment regarding the protection of children and their bodies at this moment in American culture. When academic work such as Mirkin's is demonized and punished for remarking on what has been said hundreds of time before in similar contexts, it is hard not to conceive of this cultural moment as one marked by panic, uncritical censorship, and poisonous scapegoating.⁵

The Queer Exigence of Child Panic

Parents are correct to be concerned about homosexuals sexually assaulting their children....It is evident from the statistical evidence and news reports of child molestation cases, that homosexuals pose a clear and present danger to children. Our laws and social policies should protect children, not cater to the whims and sexual desires of sexual predators. We must oppose homosexual activism "for the children's sake."

--The International Organization of
Heterosexual Rights, 2001

Gaining access to children has been a long-term goal of the homosexual movement.

--The Traditional Values Coalition, 2004

Homosexuals cannot reproduce—so they must recruit. And to freshen their ranks, they must recruit the youth of America.

--Anita Bryant, 1977

I choose queer theory as a starting point for this discussion of childhood signification in order to argue for the centrality of homophobia and homosexual panic to so many of the recent contestations over children. It is my contention that the cultural moments previously mentioned—the JonBenet Ramsey murder, the Columbine shootings, the Catholic Church scandal, the publication of "children in crisis" literature—all produce, explicitly or implicitly, sustained homophobic meanings. Even when these moments are not explicitly characterized as sexual, I suggest that a spectral queer presence exists in every "child endangerment" discourse. Thus, it becomes evident that the voices of authority—media, the church, the state—who speak *for* children and their protection are also most often speaking *against* queer sexuality.

The impetus for this dissertation lies in Lee Edelman's scholarship on queer identity, the figural child, and signification in American culture. Taking a cue from Lauren Berlant's work on fetal citizenship and America's consideration of the hypothetical child as the ideal citizen,⁶ Edelman remarks in his book *No Future* that the child is the "telos of the social order" that "figures an identification with an always about-to-be-realized identity," and therefore achieves "symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to reproduce the social subject."⁷ He proceeds to suggest that queer sexualities, because they are incapable of performing the "mandatory cultural labor of social reproduction," signify a rupture in the illusory marriage of futurity to identity that the child is meant to embody. Thus, queerness always poses a threat to the figural child because it perverts the heteronormative fantasy of futurity in its resistance to the social reproduction of the same.

Edelman's insistence, then, that queer identity is effaced through its non-compliance with political futurity and that children are the ultimate "privileged ensign" of this futurity suggests that, with the increasing politicization of children and their bodies, comes the increasing politicization of the queer subject. Because queerness is perceived so fundamentally as a threat to the welfare of children—as a threat to children's bodies, to their futures (and by extension, everyone's futures), to their indoctrination into normative heterosexuality—it becomes vital to articulate the high stakes to queer subjects in how children are represented, and of course, to recognize that children as subjects themselves have everything at stake in how the child signifies culturally. This dissertation insists on the formidable power of representations of the child to transform queer cultural signification.

In taking the representation and reception of the figural child as the primary object of inquiry here, I am not interested in building definitional parameters around the terms child or childhood. I will not be starting with the assumption that a completely viable or uncontested definition of child—particularly one delineated by age—exists, nor will I be invested in making constant distinction between infancy, preadolescence, adolescence, or young adulthood. As James Kincaid notes in his book *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Culture*,

My "child," then is not defined or controlled by age limits, since it seems to me that anyone between the ages of one day and 25 years or even beyond might, in different contexts, play that role. What a child is, in other words, changes to fit different situations and different needs.⁸

It is precisely these "different situations and different needs"—the needs of queer spectators, for example, as well as the needs and insecurities of homophobic spectators who perhaps have different investments in the figural child--to which I hope to bring some clarity and specificity in my examination of different texts and how they are received. Because I focus largely on reception practices, the ever-shifting definitions of the child produced within public discourse will be considered a litmus test to help describe the cultural context in which this reception is operating.

I return here to Jenkins' work within cultural studies, as he addresses the lenses through which cultural critics have been attentive to the child as a social and ideological entity. Jenkins identifies three major strands in recent writing about childhood within the genre of cultural studies:

1. the examination of the meanings that children carry for adults.
2. historical research into our shifting understanding of the relations between children and adults;
3. studies of children as cultural and social agents.

In addressing this first body of writing, he offers the following assessment: "Too often, our culture imagines childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to realms of imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent, and in the end, waiting to be corrupted or protected by adults."⁹

This dissertation proceeds primarily along Jenkins' first line of inquiry. It is less concerned with the construction of a critical space, a site of children's embeddedness in their own cultural economy characterized by production and consumption, than it is with

how adults construct an economy of desire that centralizes children and yet denies their place in it. These juvenile associations with the primitive, innocent, ahistorical, asocial, and imaginary become salient in my analyses of child texts and their reception. Yet, I want to further this argument about the adult cultural imagining of children as it is put in the service of homophobic discourse about sexual predation and child endangerment. The ideological regimes necessary to secure the innocence of the child become strained and stretched, particularly in the visual encounter with the child, when the immediacy of the desire for the child image threatens to dissolve these juvenile associations with the innocent.

Scholarship on the cultural status of the child in America has taken diverse and fruitful forms, yet there exists a significant ellipsis within theories of filmic spectatorship regarding cinematic children. This study engages the child figure's relation to the cinematic apparatus and analyzes spectator responses to the child's presentation as a desiring subject and desired object. Within contemporary American culture, the child figure generates at once a *mise-en-scène* of desire and a *mise-en-abîme* of potential stigmatization, self-abjection and shame. The vexed relation to the image of the child that characterizes the contemporary adult citizen and, more pointedly, the adult spectator, is a symptom of the contradictory discourses of childhood at play in contemporary American media and within its political bodies. America currently views the child as always imperiled, subject to the whims of violent and sexual predators. Yet, more than ever, the eroticization of children's bodies has inundated cinematic and other media productions, generating anxieties within the adult spectator concerning the propriety of

gazing at children. In fact, the compulsion to gaze at children, whether cinematically or otherwise, has never been stronger. If, as Laura Mulvey argues, cinematic femininity is that which “connotes *to-be-looked-at-ness*,” childhood has come to occupy a similar site of fascination in the economy of the gaze, though to radically different effect.

Juvenile Desires suggests that the dissonances produced by the contradictory signposts of moral panic and sexual objectification have too often given rise to a homophobically polarizing model of the adult spectator: on the one hand, the ostensibly heterosexual spectator whose relation to the child image is aesthetically distanced, moral, and nostalgic; and on the other, a perverse, likely homosexual spectator whose relation is libidinal, regressive, and genitally oriented. The study builds from James Kincaid’s assertion that Victorian culture to the present hinges on a pervasive erotics of childhood, as well as a disavowal of that eroticism that condenses cultural pedophilia into a discrete pedophile identity. As a theoretical intervention and a reception study, this dissertation examines the term pedophilia as one both culturally over-determined and critically under-investigated. The deployment of the term pedophilia has the rhetorical effect of reducing the complex relations sustained among adult spectators and children to a space of inarticulate abjection or criminality. The dissertation proposes that a deconstructive queer theory can unsettle the recalcitrant association of pedophilia with homosexual pathology, and thereby afford a complex and nuanced account of the roles cinematic children play in generating visual and narrative pleasure across gendered and sexually oriented subject positions.

Chapter 1, “The Queerness of Child-Gazing,” introduces the queer desires that inform viewing positions across sexual identifications vis-à-vis the cinematic child. The chapter argues for the need to separate the often conflated ideas of eroticism and genitality in order to acknowledge that the child can be a source of pleasure without being the object of bodily violation. Chapters 2 and 3 take contemporary cinematic child texts as case studies to explicate the queer model of spectatorship of children that I have proposed and to explore the connections among child-gazing, visual pleasure, spectator anxiety, and homophobic projection.

Chapter 2, “The Child Who Knew Too Much,” reads the collective films of Haley Joel Osment, particularly *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Pay It Forward* (2000), and Spielberg’s *A. I.: Artificial Intelligence*, as portraits of giftedness and allegories of queer childhood. The chapter articulates the semiotics that characterize Osment’s portrayal of boys who are alienated from the social worlds they inhabit, whether through their eerie precocity, inauthenticity, or maternal over-attachment. It examines gay, lesbian, and transgender celebratory responses, in print and on the web, to the Osment child-hero in each text to demonstrate the films’ production of a fantasy space in which queer subjects may imaginatively rework their own sense of estrangement as queer children into a scenario of transcendence. It also analyzes various online websites devoted to homophobic parody of Osment’s films (one which substitutes *The Sixth Sense*’s tagline “I See Dead People” with “I See Gay People.”). The chapter concludes by suggesting that the precocious or gifted child figure produces the opportunity for a reparative queer reading practice as

well as a disruption of hetero-normative boundaries between childhood and erotic knowledge.

Chapter 3, “Shaping Pedophilic Discourse,” explores depictions of adult-child eroticism in *American Beauty* (1999) and *Happiness* (1998). It reads these films against online responses to them, through the *Internet Movie Database*, in order to illuminate how spectators simultaneously express pleasure (or displeasure) in representations of intergenerational desire and resist characterization of their own viewing positions as pedophilic in nature. It further suggests that, for the audience-critics of these films, heterosexual intergenerational desire is cast as a literary trope, as a *mise-en-scène* of spiritual and physical regeneration, while pedophilia as a stigmatized social category only becomes articulable in discussions of same-sex desire.

Chapter 4, “Ambivalence, Anxiety, and the Spectacle of the Nymphet/Living Doll,” extends the investigation of erotic children by moving from cinema to visual culture more broadly conceived. It offers a queer reading of the media spectacle of child beauty pageant star JonBenet Ramsey and the ambivalence produced by her simultaneous sexual objectification and embodiment of innocence endangered. In this reception study, I examine responses of pro-child activists, pageant participants, feminist cultural critics, and the general viewing public to investigate the various assumptions about feminine maturity that fuel the interpretation of Ramsey’s image. The chapter suggests that the anxiety generated by Ramsey’s image can be traced to her “drag” performances, which foreground the idea of femininity as performance and excess and call into question the power of the gaze to discern appropriate objects of desire.

In introducing the question of children and desire into cinematic spectatorship, and framing it within a discourse of queer sexuality, the dissertation points to an under-interrogated manifestation of cultural homophobia through its insistence that pedophilic and homosexual identities be extricated from one another. It also demands a more rigorous and variegated schema for explaining erotic ways of looking at children that need not entail the endangerment of children or the mortification of the spectator.

¹ Jenkins, Henry. *The Children's Culture Reader*. New York: NYU Press, 1998: p.3.

² Jenkins, 4.

³ Ballantine Press published Kindlon and Thompson's book; it is the same publisher as Pipher, and Pipher wrote the forward for the 1999 edition of Pollack's book. This convergence suggests that a veritable cottage industry is emerging around the rehabilitation of America's youth. It is also interesting to note the titular imitation of Pipher's book—the recurring gerund phrase emphasizing "rescue, saving, protection."

⁴ www.cnsnews.com/Nation%5Carchive%5C200204%5CNAT20020408a.html. Accessed April 8, 2002.

⁵ Outside the academy, in more mainstream journalism, Judith Levine's *Harmful to Minors* has caused significant controversy as well because of its assertions that children are sexual beings and should not be kept from erotic knowledge and experience.

⁶ See Lauren Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

⁷ Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

⁸ Kincaid, James. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁹ Jenkins, 6.

Chapter 1

The Queerness of Child-Gazing

Does the adult fantasist always
cling to defenses first developed
as an imaginative child?¹

In his preface to a study of fairy tales within Victorian letters, U. C. Knoepfelmacher poses the question above. He postulates that the line between adult and children's fiction was arbitrarily drawn in the late nineteenth century and that, in fact, authors of "children's literature," as well as adult readers, had as much psychic investment in the portrayal of youth as did a juvenile readership. Knoepfelmacher suggests that male Victorian writers deployed conventions of the fairy tale meant to designate girlhood as a space of eternal juvenility, countering the longstanding tradition of women's writings for children which were "anti-fantastic" and designed to support their "belief in a child's orderly progression towards maturity within a temporal world marked by boundaries and limits."² In his view, male Victorian writers constructed a fantasy of girlhood in their texts that would compensate for their perception of a "lost feminine complement" in their lives and allow them a vicarious identification with this eternal girl. To explain this investment, he argues broadly that, because authors are always adults who were former children, that "all children's books involve, in varied combinations and to varied degrees, an adult reactivation of childhood selves all of us harbor."³

Jacqueline Rose has also famously written on this "adult reactivation," finding spurious the idea that children's texts were even ever designed with a juvenile audience

in mind. She describes children's literature as taking shape around adults' fears about and desires for children and as contributing institutionally to the cultural powerlessness of children. Surveying the work of J.M. Barrie, particularly *Peter Pan*, she prefaces her analysis, "It will not be an issue here of what the child wants, but of what the adult desires—desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech. Children's fiction draws in the child; it secures, places and frames the child."⁴ She goes on to define desire in this context not

in the sense of an act which is sought after or which must actually take place...[but as] a form of investment by the adult in the child, and the demand made by the adult on the child as the effect of that investment, a demand which fixes the child and then holds it in place. A turning to the child, or a circulating around the child—what is at stake here is not so much something which could be enacted, as something which cannot be spoken.⁵

The excavation of desire within children's texts and the ways these desires both shape literary representations of children and inform their reception has been a preoccupation of Victorian scholars, as well as within children's literary and cultural Studies more generally. James Kincaid, in his *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, traces literature of the late nineteenth century—both fiction and treatises on child care, sexology, and psychoanalysis—to account for certain continuities between Victorian culture and contemporary discourse and structures of feeling surrounding children. He suggests that childhood innocence has itself been eroticized and strongly disavowed as erotic, leaving the adult with the burden of having to shore up his/her position vis-à-vis the child through assigning pedophilic feelings to a scapegoat-outsider. Kincaid points to the ideological necessity of publicly evacuating the child of

any sort of sexuality, of designating the child as “that species which is free of sexual feeling or response; the adult [as] that species which has crossed over into sexuality.”⁶

Elaborating on Rose’s proposition that desire is an “investment...circulating around the child,” he offers the following on the relationship of adult desire to the figural child:

[T]he child is not simply the Other we desire but the Other we must have in order to know longing, love, lust at all. The child is that which we are not but almost are, that which we yearn for so fiercely we almost resent it, that which we thought we saw in the mirror and almost wanted to possess yet feared we might. The child is the embodiment of desire and also its negation.⁷

While not offering a substantially more concrete schema than Rose, Kincaid foregrounds some of the crucial interplays and contradictions of identification and desire with which this dissertation is centrally concerned.

This project has many affinities with Kincaid’s, some of which I am reluctant to embrace. Perhaps, most problematic is the presumption to discuss matters of adult spectatorship (in his case, readership as well), with the use of the first person plural (his explicit; mine often implied). It is my hope that this work as a whole will not evince some idea of a universal spectator, but instead designate a multitude of them who, although with different backgrounds, sensibilities, political groundings, etc., do share some meaningful cultural references and experience many of the same socio-political forces which are brought to bear on their encounter with the child figure. Kincaid defends his homogenizing “we,” with the following qualification:

Different people in different places at different times feel wildly different things about quite specific children (and differently, of course, about different children). People have very different notions about what “a child” is and what counts as

attraction. Probably most of us, but certainly I, find it hard to locate what exactly it is we do feel.⁸

Accounting for the specificities, the uniqueness of the encounter with the child's image from the standpoints of temporality, space, and identity is theoretically desirable, yet pragmatically impossible in a project of this sort—for it is one that desires an ethnography of the impossibly located subject(s). The project moves from ethnographic desire to psychoanalytic explanation to socio-historical positioning and back again in a way that cannot account for all subjects. Yet it can offer introductory rubrics for opening up the complexities of spectatorship in ways that have not been previously explored. The “we” that may be implied in the attempt to discern what juvenile desires “are” and what people make (or don't make) of these desires is open to challenge, to complication and embattlement.

In the course of this chapter, I extend and hone the prevalent idea of the textual gaze that critics such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Rose, Kincaid, and Knoepfelmacher have proposed as central to understanding engagement with child texts and introduce the child figure to the intricacies of the cinematic gaze and the theoretical apparatuses that become available to discuss its dynamics. In doing so, I argue for the value of feminist and queer film theory in mining the child figure as fertile ground for developing questions about how power, desire, and identification constellate around visually realized children and in accounting for the cultural conditions that inflect these constellations. In particular, I argue for the *cinematicity* of children, filmic and otherwise, in order to underscore the critical neglect of children's images and the cultural responses to them, as well as to demonstrate the fruitful insights that may be yielded in locating children in the

economy of the gaze. These insights derive from some basic tenets of film theory that emphasize the immediacy and potency of the encounter with the filmic image, enunciating the child-as-figure's status as a dream screen, a point of mediation for active fantasy so often attributed to the film screen.

Having established the theoretical need to view children as immanently cinematic, I characterize the child-gaze as a fundamentally queer phenomenon, an experience that, when unpacked, exposes the fissures and frailties of a hetero-normative conception of the adult spectator's relation to the child and to his/her own desires. The definitional framework of the category "queer" in this study draws from the seminal work of Sedgwick. Sedgwick posits queer identity as that which puts pressure on hetero-normative assumptions that sexual identity is and should be predicated on a natural, obvious, and healthy alignment of gender, object choice, genital cathexis, familial teleology, procreative purpose, and fantasy object.⁹ Adult spectatorship is queer, then, precisely because the child figure can engage scopophilic desire, and even be a source of eroticism, in ways that belie the coherence of this alignment. The chapter argues for the need to separate the often conflated ideas of eroticism and genitality in order to acknowledge that the child can be a source of pleasure without being the object of bodily violation. Indeed, adult spectators gaze at the child figure with varying degrees of nostalgic yearning, aesthetic appreciation, visceral attachment, scopophilic mastery, and identification that cannot always be neatly parsed out.

To demonstrate the polyvalent modes of spectatorship practiced by viewers of vastly different sexual and social identifications, chapter one further endeavors to chart

the various queer forms of adult spectatorship. It does so by offering an introductory typology of filmic children as a means of creating a queer interpretive framework—one that refuses to consign queer identity to a reductive genitally-interested subject position vis-à-vis the child and at the same time refuses to exonerate hetero-normative identity from complex, elusive, and often erotic investments in it.

Desiring children, whether desiring is understood as a gerund or a participle, have/has marginal terrain in contemporary American public discourse. The image of the child, as I have noted above, is most often an imperiled one. Children in public space are at risk in the cultural imagination. Consider the following well-worn scenarios: the child playing in the park accosted by the pervert on the bench; the child walking home from school who is beckoned to from a car with tinted windows, lured by the promise of candy; the child in the back row of the theater, groped by a stranger; the trusting altar boy who numbly succumbs to the advances of his priest; the child led into abusive ritual by her day care teacher; the child approached and snatched at the mall. The child is now perhaps more Dickensian than she was in any Dickens novel. However, in a radical departure from Dickens, the consequence of these saturated public imaginings has been the impulse to conceptualize the home and the family as the guarantors of children's safety.

The ideological “housing” of children's safety, I contend, is another symptom of the hetero-normative mandate that localizes the heterosexual nuclear home as the space for the proliferation of the same. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*,

Lauren Berlant remarks on the interconnections of child, the home, privatization, and national ideology:

No longer valuing personhood as something directed toward public life, contemporary nationalist ideology recognizes a public good only in a particularly constricted nation of simultaneously lived private worlds...[I]n the new, utopian America, mass-mediated political identifications can only be rooted in traditional notions of home, family, and community.¹⁰

Berlant situates as the main concern of her book an inquiry into “why the most hopeful national pictures of ‘life’ circulating in the public sphere are not of adults in everyday life, in public, or in politics, but rather of the most minor or virtual citizens—fetuses, children, real and imaginary immigrants—persons that, paradoxically, cannot yet act as citizens.”¹¹ The imaginative force with which the ideal citizen is constructed as a future or hypothetical subject is the same force with which the child is envisioned to be made safe through her ensconcement in the privacy of home. The nation bestows premier subjecthood on the child, anchoring him as the basis for political action and social meaning, and in return the child figure secures the primacy of the heterosexual family by occupying the center of domestic space. The child is central in the imagining of family; the family unit is central in the imagining of nation.

This dissertation begins with the assumption that American culture currently is at a zenith concerning the politicization of children and their bodies. It responds to this observation by suggesting that, like any other politically contested category of identity—whether woman, homosexual, person of color, etc.—it becomes important to theorize how the meanings of the child and childhood are constructed and negotiated through popular cultural texts, particularly in the realm of visual culture. Because age is

another category that is tremendously tied up in power relations— who may speak for children, how children may speak, what weight their speech has, and how that speech does or does not connect to competency and agency, age needs to be foregrounded in critical discourse as a foundational subject of analysis. I argue here for the creation of a body of theory that places children centrally in questions of spectatorship, desire, and identification. This dissertation argues for the *cinematicity* of children in many cultural contexts, in iconographies of the child that fall outside cinema. The child is cinematic in all of its manifestations, whether on the news, in fairy tales, in political campaigns, precisely because it is so watchable, consumable, so readily a “dream screen” of its own, replete with nostalgia and fantasy production. Thus, while I have employed methodologies explicitly here to understand the child within the realm of cinematic production and reception, these may easily have explanatory resonance in many areas of cultural studies of children. Within the parameters of this exploratory project, I focus mainly on contemporary filmic texts, both mainstream and independent, because the politicization of identity and subjectivity has long been part and parcel of the discourse around the cinematic apparatus.

Indeed, feminist responses to more formalist accounts of cinema spectatorship followed closely on the heels of the women's movement in the late sixties and early seventies. With the appeals to equal rights and equal opportunities in the political arena came new consideration in the academy about gendered ways of looking, the cultural construction of woman (as opposed to *women*), and how representation is in dialogue with ideology. Similarly, in the eighties, fueled largely by nascent AIDS activism and

the increasing politicization of sexual orientation, queer theory emerged as a disciplinary entity to grapple with issues of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered representation. As early as 1980, large groups were organizing to protest the production and release of the film *Cruising* based on its perceived homophobic representation of the gay community. Queries into stereotyping and negative representation in visual culture have likewise been the focus of a great deal of critical race theory. Central to critical race theory has been the interrogation of the construction of whiteness, and racial coding across film genres; the treatment of miscegenation, power dynamics among interracial characters, etc. Concomitant to developments within the academy on racial politics in film has been the formation of watch-dog groups that provide vocal public criticism for distorted (and absent) representations of race in film—groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Media Advocacy Network for Asian-Americans, the National Hispanic Media Coalition, the national Council of La Raza, American Indians in Film and Television, and the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

I foreground this link between cultural and political consolidation of identities and their engagement with theories of spectatorship in visual culture to express the exigencies of the current contestations around the meanings of the child. In this dissertation, I do not seek simply to replace the contested category "woman" or "queer" with the term "child" with the presupposition that, having a substitutable relation to other categories of difference, its place in the cinematic apparatus can be described simply in the vocabulary provided by feminist and queer film theory. I do suggest, however, that placing children

centrally in the question of how desire and identification are generated visually (especially cinematically) will illuminate new facets of the relationships between visual pleasure and cultural politics.

I find the reasons for this introduction of childhood semiotics into theories of spectatorship compelling. First, the vocabulary of childhood has usually been present, through metaphor and figure, in descriptions of filmic characterizations of gendered, racial, and sexual difference. Early feminist film criticism—images-of-women criticism and the like—focused on the ways in which women are infantilized, filmically and in larger cultural formations, in order to render them asexual, powerless, less developed, and necessarily under patriarchal control. Similarly, critical race theory has remarked on how discourses of racial primitivism are inscribed in visual culture; blacks are infantilized through performances of childish spectacle or through their depiction as wisely residing under the wing of the surrogate white father, even in the more liberal-leaning strands of cinema. Critic Richard Fung has remarked on the tendency to represent Asians and Asian-Americans as child-like, particularly in the ways visual culture (pornography specifically) castrates and emasculates Asian men.¹² Likewise, queer film theory has often noted the ways gays and lesbians are depicted as existing in a state of arrested development. Their sexual proclivities often are cast in terms of never having reached an adult heterosexuality; this characterization, of course, leads to an association of queers with perverse child-like figures.

Beyond more textually centered questions of the representation of gendered, racialized, and sexualized differences, film theory has long been invested in the figural

child for its keen way of metaphorizing the spectator's engagement with the moving image. The "dream screen" through which identity is cinematically constituted and negotiated is linked to theoretical accounts of childhood identity formation. Fantasy theory, especially the work of Elizabeth Cowie and Teresa de Lauretis, has utilized Freud's idea of the primal scene, the child's first traumatic witnessing of parental sexual coupling, to explain the emergence of scopophilic drive and the complexity of subject positioning in the act of voyeurism.¹³ In an earlier account, Christian Metz draws on the Lacanian imaginary, "that site of the initial constitution of the ego prior to the Oedipal moment,"¹⁴ to explain the place of the unconscious in filmic engagement, analogizing spectatorship through a child's ego development. These provocative accounts of spectatorship have made inroads into our understanding of semiotics and cinema, but I suggest that the child-position as metaphor for semiotic processes has often overshadowed or rendered unintelligible the space for discussing childhood as sign or as a *mise-en-scène* of desire. In the arguments I present in the following chapters, by contrast, I hope to foreground the politics and pleasures of "spectators-of-children" rather than "spectators-as-children."

Here I turn to several precepts found within various strands of feminist film theory that have been articulated over the past thirty years. I do so, as I have said, not to insert children unproblematically into these models of spectatorship but instead to look in to the productive analogies that may arise when discussing the spectatorship of the child figure. Certain formulations of Laura Mulvey, in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," concerning the filmic apparatus and its structuring of the gendered

gaze will be useful to consider in terms of how an adult/child dichotomy might be explained in terms of spectatorship. First, Mulvey contends that, within classical Hollywood cinema, the filmic apparatus aligns the male spectator's gaze with both that of the camera and the male protagonist. In this schema, woman is the "bearer-of-the-look."¹⁵ The female spectator, then, is consigned to a transvestite identification with the empowered male gaze or to a masochistic identification with the passive woman on the screen, acted upon by the male agent/camera. For Mulvey, this positioning of the gaze indicates the masculine need for scopophilic mastery, for retaining the authority to a voyeuristic possession of woman as sign.

In addition to this scopophilia derived from the perceived position of mastery, Mulvey argues that the gaze may be one of fetishization as well. It stems from the male spectator's fears of castration that are invoked through the identification with the female Other. Fetishization is one means of negotiating this anxiety of the encounter with fundamental sexual difference; through fetish, the male spectator may disavow the sexual difference signified by woman.

In setting up the adult/child binary, I am not trying to reify the spectatorial positions or the motivations of the gaze, but to point to the potentials of the child to "screen" fantasy, to be the screen of meaning, to possess "to-be-looked-at-ness." Some analogies here, if perhaps grossly drawn, may shed light on the place of the child on screen. Just as woman is the image that is interpreted, given form, and enunciated through the male camera-protagonist-spectator, so too is the child figure enunciated in the language, desires, and visual cues generated for the adult. My opening references to

Knoepfmacher and Rose in this chapter make the literary case for this enunciation. I propose that, though it may be an obvious point, it becomes important to understand that the adult enunciates the child through filmic narrative and spectacle.

What is more, just as Mulvey proposes that the gendered structure of the gaze in classical Hollywood cinema is meant to secure patriarchal positions of power vis-à-vis subject/object and active/passive, a hetero-normative gaze marked by the positions adult/child is similarly structured, not only through the dichotomies of active/passive and subject/object, but also by sexual/asexual. I contend that the hetero-normative gaze is heavily invested in denying eroticism in and around the child and in affixing its innocence. In what follows in this chapter, I demonstrate that this hetero-normative gaze is always unsettled, contradicted despite enunciative attempts on the part of the creators, camera, and spectator.

The question of fetishization in relation to child spectatorship is an interesting one. A strictly Freudian account of the fetish would render this question moot, as it operates through the castration complex and the gendered relation to having or being the phallus. I do not wish to discuss fetish strictly in these terms, but there are some compelling resonances about castration, the pre-pubescent, and identification. If castration centers on the anxieties of losing the penis/phallus within the male spectator and the process of fetishization is meant to assuage the anxieties over its potential loss, I wonder—as I suggest later—if something is castrating about the fears of over-identification with the child, if seeing and being the child threaten to become blurred, effecting a relinquishing of the potencies of mature (virile versus feminine) subjectivity.

Yet, the child may not signify loss, so much as plenitude; it is difficult, and maybe impossible, to understand whether the child evokes surplus (a new phallus to have/be) or lack (a phallus not yet, and maybe never developed). Again, I am trying not to embed this argument in a Freudian orthodoxy, but to explore how this language may energize the dynamics of spectatorship. I can offer no definitive account of the question of fetish, and I imagine that a more complex lens of gendered identifications—both the genders of the child body objects and of the spectators—is necessary to glimpse the semiotic substitutions at play in the encounter with the child.

I have mentioned Mulvey's contention that the scopophilic gaze—the pleasure in looking—is symptomatic of the will to master the image. Recently, Todd McGowan, in his essay, "Looking For the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes," has challenged the tendency of Lacanian psychoanalytic critics to view the gaze as the subject's quest for mastery. Instead of proceeding from the assumption that the desiring subject gains control through fixing in its eye the "to-be-looked-at" object, he cautions critics against misreading Lacan's intended schema of visual power. Following the lead of Joan Copjec, he argues that critics have aligned Lacan with the theories of Nietzsche and Foucault who define the gaze as a position of mastery. A more faithful reading of Lacanian theory establishes the gaze as the vehicle through which the subject seeks to glimpse the *objet petit a* within the Other. It is the place of the abject, the realm of jouissance that the subject hopes to cast its eyes on in the object.

McGowan cites Gaylyn Studlar's assessment of the current state of theory, which, for her "ignores the pleasure in submission that is phylogenetically older than the

pleasure of mastery—for both sexes.” She continues, “In masochism, as in the infantile stage of helpless dependence that marks its genesis, pleasure does not involve mastery of the female but submission to her. This pleasure applies to the infant, the masochist, and the film spectator as well.”¹⁶ Again the language of the child, of the infantile, crops up to explain spectator positions, but not in a way as to explain the spectator of the child.

Echoing Studlar’s critique of the tendency to “conflate the gaze and mastery,” he argues that seeing “desire as only an active process, is to miss the importance of a much more radical kind of desire—the desire to submit to the Other.”¹⁷

McGowan’s take on glimpsing the traumatic *jouissance* within the Other is that the gaze is not about mastery, but about the terrible pleasure and reversal of power that occurs when the object gazes back. This reversal of the gaze entails experiencing profound powerlessness within the Other, which results in a freeing of the subject from signification that binds. While I do not wish to adopt a strictly Lacanian framework to understand the workings of the gaze at the child, I am intrigued by a general suggestion that evolves from this nuanced account of the gaze and desire. Instead of relegating the adult to active and child to passive positioning, it is possible that pleasure in fact comes from glimpsing the powerlessness that we perceive to be the province of the child. I would like to keep as an active question, How might traumatic *jouissance* be another phrase for the staging of nostalgia?

The final strand of feminist theory that I want to engage is fantasy theory; it is perhaps the most productive site for the explication of spectatorship of the child. The subtitle of this dissertation is indebted to a central concept within studies of fantasy. The

focus on the cinematic experience of a *mise-en-scène* of desire complicates the simple assignments of subject and object to describe cinematic identifications. As a correlative to my earlier assertion of the *cinematicity* of children, I suggest that children function not solely as subjects or objects, but themselves as *mise-en-scènes* of desire in that they evoke a field of fantasy and desiring. Fantasy theory relies on the structure of the primal scene to explain the workings of the cinematic gaze. Within Freud's conception of the primal fantasy, "A Child Is Being Beaten," a traumatic imagining of a formative punishment involving parent and child structures all fantasy life and the ways in which memory, particularly childhood memory, can be accessed.

Psychoanalytic theorists Jean LaPlanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis use the primal fantasy to explain the multiple points of identification that exist within any fantasy scenario; film, of course, becomes one of the most interesting mediums to explore multiple engagement with fantasy. Freud notes how both the sex of the child being beaten and the person doing the beating oscillate in the different stages of the scenario. From this proposition, Laplanche and Pontalis deduce that this scene "is characterized by the absence of subjectivization. In fantasy, the subject does not pursue the desired object or its sign, but itself appears caught up in the sequence of signs." If a fantasy of seduction entails the father's seduction of the daughter, for LaPlanche and Pontalis, this supplies a "scenario with multiple entries, in which nothing shows whether the subject will be immediately located as daughter; it can as well be fixed as father, or even in the term seduces." Thus, the contributions of fantasy theory to film spectatorship emerge in the realization that a fantasy may have a fluctuating or complex syntax, in which subject

and object alone are not sufficient to describe the dynamic of desire inherent in the fantasy/dream. This schema of fantasy need not be personalized or privatized in such a way, but instead may take a public form. Cowie explains how the structuring of desire may be represented in public form such as film. She argues, “What is necessary in public forms of fantasy for their successful collective consumption is not universal objects of desire, but a setting of desiring in which we can find our place(s).”¹⁸

The dismissal of “universal objects of desire” is important to this project because it renounces as simplistic and formulaic the subject-object mode and announces a more complex, multiply positioned way of viewing. Understanding spectatorship of children as a complex process of desiring and identifying more accurately tracks the flow of desire for, of, and around the filmic child figure. To help describe the various erotic investments in iconographies of childhood, I propose in this chapter a typology of the filmic child that designates particular avatars of the juvenile subject. In doing so, I suggest that each avatar facilitates a certain structure of desire that circulates between the adult spectator and the child object. While this heuristic formulation of the child type is meant to account for a generalized response to each avatar image, a great amount of seepage exists among the different categories I suggest. What is more, the child’s avatar status may be read differently from viewer to viewer in terms of the identification conjured and the desires produced.

Thus, these avatars that I detail are not *a priori* figures of childhood but ones that become (reasonably) coherent through their connections to the various *machines* of desire that are attached to each type. Starting with the premise that filmic child figures are

“desire machines,” I use the term *machines* to designate the mechanics of desire, to connote the psychic processes of negotiation at work in the spectator’s encounter with and investment in the representation of childhood that the film/child evokes. These various machines generate a *mise-en scène* of desire, a visual or psychic setting that places the viewer in a fantastic, imaginary relation to the child. In what follows, I propose six avatars of filmic childhood: *the Living Doll*, *the Golden Child*, *the Brat*, *the Nymphet/Ephebe*, *the Phantom*, and *the Freak*. With a discussion of each avatar, I propose a basic structure of desire that is immanent within the semiotic register of that type.

Table A: Typologies of the Filmic Child

Type	Sub Types	Examples	Machine	Imaginative Engines
The Living Doll	The Precious Child The Consumable Child	JonBenet Ramsey Shirley Temple Mary Pickford	Nostalgia	Valorizes the formative, the miniature; fetishizes the child body as locus of permanent youth; views child as point of access to what is lost in maturity.
The Brat/Monster	The Terrible Child The Insatiable Child	<i>The Bad Seed</i> <i>Veruca Salt</i> ¹ <i>Dennis the Menace</i>	Punishment	Posits childhood as finite; phobic of arrested development; locates the child in a beating fantasy.
The Golden Child	The Proto-Citizen The Proto-Hero	The Olsen Twins <i>Dead Poets Society</i> <i>The Karate Kid</i>	Narcissism	Rehearses childhood innocence; affixes child as site of future identity, reproduction of the same.
The Nymphet/Ephebe	The Vixen The Flirt The Seductive Boy	Lolita Haze Angela Hayes ² Leonardo DiCaprio ³	Mirroring	Eroticizes youthful identification; arouses sexual desire.
The Phantom	The Victim The Ghost The Poor Child The Martyr The Lost Child	<i>Oliver Twist</i> <i>Little Eva</i> <i>The Little Match Girl</i> Johnny Grasso ⁴	Melancholia	Engages masochism; replays scene of loss, alienation. aestheticizes mourning; objectifies the absent presence.
The Freak	The Alien The Nerd The Gender Dissonant The Outcast	Haley Joel Osment <i>Dawn Wiener</i> ⁵ <i>Carrie</i> <i>Ricky Fitts</i> ⁶ Billy Maplewood ⁷	Relationality	Negotiates abject child identities; reframes marginal positions as central points of identification; re-energizes or transforms shame.

¹ From *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*; Character names in italics.

² From *American Beauty*

³ Particularly as Arthur Rimbaud in *Total Eclipse*

⁴ From *Happiness*.

⁵ From *Welcome to the Dollhouse*

⁶ From *American Beauty*

⁷ From *Happiness*.

THE LIVING DOLL

Reverence, adoration, and fascination typify the encounter with the Living Doll. It is an aesthetic relationship of spectator to filmic object and potentially an erotic one as well. A machinery of nostalgia is at work in its apprehension. While the trope of the Living Doll is bound in a longstanding and complicated discourse of the Uncanny, which I consider at length in chapter four of the dissertation, I am interested here in characterizing the encounter with the Living Doll as one less fraught with questions of homeliness or mortality and more of the generative uses of the visually realized spectacle of femininity in miniature. (I am not arguing that this avatar is always necessarily feminine, though I am hard-pressed to think of a boy-gendered object that stages this kind of encounter.)¹⁹ In suggesting that the encounter with the Doll is “generative,” in terms of fantasy or aesthetic appreciation, I do not intend to promote a necessarily positive or celebratory frame for this encounter, but only contend that it is a vibrant source of fantastic engagement with femininity (or masculinity) and the suturing of past, present and future.

It is perhaps appropriate to begin with the Living Doll in my typology here simply because its appearance and celebration predate classical Hollywood cinema by several years. Arguably, the Phantom, the Golden Child, and some version of the Nymphet can be located in seminal film work as well, though they were rarely celebrated as such. The overwhelming popularity of young Mary Pickford, the “Doll Divine,” from 1909 onward demonstrates the fascination with the Doll filmic figure. In the early 30s, Shirley Temple came to occupy the cultural space and visual medium carved out by young starlets like

Pickford. These young girls, deemed “America’s Sweethearts,” were fetishized as embodiments of a sort of Victorian innocence. Recent critics have remarked on the coinciding “inventions” of Victorian childhood and modern notions of sexualized femininity, producing a sort of “erotic innocence” that coheres within the image of Pickford and the like.²⁰ While I agree with this assessment, it is a particular structure of desire that I am typing here, and that structure excludes an overt or conscious assessment of the Doll’s figure as sexualized. Indeed, much work is done to dislocate overt sexuality from this image. When Graham Greene, editor of *Night and Day*, wrote of the sexual coquettishness of Shirley Temple, the magazine was forced to close and was sued for libel.²¹ The normative denial of the Doll’s sexuality or capacity to arouse sexual feeling attempts to foreclose the possibilities of intergenerational eroticism among spectators and filmic children. Yet the visual delectation in the Doll’s image suggests that femininity as it is embodied in the woman and anticipated or sketched out in the young girl is of a continuous nature that is always oriented towards sexual objectification.

Thus, the Living Doll avatar, while always containing the seeds for erotic appreciation or fulfillment, deflects this engagement and instead produces pleasure in its spectacle of (asexual?) femininity. I contend that it operates as a machine of nostalgia because it operates much like cultures of dolls do more broadly—through the celebration of a miniaturized femininity that fuses womanliness with the juvenile. This fusion is anchored in a particular form of narcissism that locates identification with the image as providing access to a shared feminine past and present.

One particular manifestation of the narcissism inherent in the encounter with the Living Doll is worth considering. It is the rhetoric of consumption used to discuss one's relation to the Living Doll and to children (particularly infants) more broadly. With great frequency in American culture, and indeed many others, adults employ the language of food or confection when dealing with children's bodies. The phrases "You are so cute; I'm going to eat you alive!" or "You look good enough to eat," are common expressions of desire for infantile bodies. Playing with young children often takes the form of (hopefully) idle threats: "I'm gonna eat your feet!" The 2005 line of Barbie Dolls introduces its "Chocolate Obsession Doll" with the tagline, "Everyone's favourite guilty pleasure is now in a beautiful doll form. She is very classy and looks good enough to eat!"²² Frequently on the Internet, people posting their baby pictures solicit feedback from those visiting the web site; many receive the response that their child looks "good enough to eat!"²³

While this tendency to express cuteness in terms of its consumptive quality may seem a commonplace, an idiom without much consequence, I contend that the desire to "eat alive" the Living Doll is a profoundly situated one—one that is located in a nexus of impulses informed by cultural standards of beauty, the imaginative conflation of cannibalism with identification, the powerlessness of children's bodies, and the compulsion to locate childhood as the site of permanent youth. The idea of cannibalizing cuteness or youth, however far-fetched and certainly never literalized, nevertheless seems like an operative fantasy within adults in their encounters with children, particularly the

Living Doll type. The “child’s play” initiated by the adult—the game of “Eat the feet,” and the like, demonstrates an aggressive, visceral relation to the “cute” child’s body.

And yet, despite this “visceral” aggression, it is remarkable how much energy has been put into developing a cultural idiom of children that so systematically de-anatomizes their bodies. And this is certainly not solely a contemporary phenomenon. Consider the Mother Goose nursery rhyme published in English in 1916, “Little girls are made of sugar and spice and everything nice, while little boys are made of snakes, snails, and puppy dog tails.”²⁴ It is a pithy rhyme at once meant to essentialize gender playfully and lyrically and to re-write children’s bodies as something apart from the flesh, and more along the lines of what we envision now in a Hallmark greeting card. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the poem aligns girlhood with a consumable confection and boyhood with animistic engagement with the outdoors. As I demonstrate in chapter four, the attempts to de-sexualize the body of beauty pageant performer JonBenet Ramsey often took the form of constellating her image with other iconographies of innocence like moonbeams, rainbows, snowflakes, and angels. Thus, desires for the flesh of the child, whether as a vehicle to access permanent childishness or to inhabit an imagined state of innocence, simultaneously transform the child into something non-corporeal, fantastic, but consumable.

I have argued that a machinery of nostalgia drives the encounter with the Living Doll. Nostalgia is a condition of yearning for an earlier state. The child activates this yearning through the absent presence of the image of a childhood that has been lost for the spectator. The child’s image is a phantasmatic one. In so far as it may provide access

to identification, there is the constant specter of the impossibility of that identification, as Jacqueline Rose points out. The fervent attempt to latch onto the semiotics of childishness, to inhabit the space of the innocent or the pre-interpellation of normative adulthood, fuels the desiring machine of the encounter with the Living Doll.

THE BRAT/MONSTER

The avatar Brat/Monster is to be found in a wide range of film genres. I have included as possible subtypes here the “Terrible Child” or the “Insatiable Child.” Exemplified through horror narrative in the form of the Bad Seed or through the comedic form in the manifestation of Dennis the Menace or the titular *Problem Child*, this type invokes an encounter with the child who wants too much, who makes perceivedly unreasonable or gross demands on the part of the spectator, either materially or psychically. If the Living Doll is a figure marked by the spectator’s desire to consumer her, this avatar dramatizes the child’s desire to consume—to consume the spectator or that which the spectator believes rightly belongs to her. The avatar functions around a fear of the “outbreak” of a pre-Oedipal aggressivity that results from the lack of a clear sense of ego. The Brat/Monster evokes the fear of excessive expenditure, of over-entitlement. It is the child who cannot be pacified or silenced through conventional bestowal of affections or material goods. The Brat always cries for more; its provider is never sufficient and cannot conceive of adequate means to appease or escape from the demands of the child.²⁵

The voraciousness of the child's needs or demands may be represented through saccharine, overly theatrical appeals to *pathos*, or perhaps even *bathos*, or through more insidious, almost inhuman cunningness. The performance may be a cuteness gone awry, wherein the spectator can no longer coo or be charmed, or a more perverse display of appetites, whether for affection or for gains of other sorts. The brat/monster's needs are somewhat arcane; the ends of its desires are mystified and seem to be subordinate to or tantamount to the undoing of the spectator/parent figure's authority. Spectatorial response to the brat/monster often takes the form of what we may think of culturally as the "shaken baby syndrome." The child who cannot be placated through what we think of simple means of satisfaction—providing food, bedding, lap-bouncing, words of assurance—becomes burdensome, even menacing. The insubordination of the brat threatens to unsettle the hierarchical relation of adult/parent to child, producing a violent need to punish it or discipline it to restore the active/passive dynamic of adult/child or do away with the dynamic entirely.

The brat is always verging on the monstrous because of its perceived inhuman (or at least, unchild-like) needs; the monster is the extreme projection of the brat's unfulfilled needs. The presumption of the modest nature of children's needs in general is evident in the ubiquitously deployed "spoiled brat." The child, when over-indulged in terms of its desires or needs, is said to be "spoiled," indicating a certain kind of integrity or purity that is expunged through meeting the child on its own terms. The language of child-rearing is saturated with such warnings about indulging the child, performing an ironic rhetorical reversal, whereby nurturing to the extreme turns into a form of corruption or

deprivation of the bestowal of ethical training. The violent rhetoric of spoilage inheres in truisms about childhood discipline such as the one coined by Samuel Butler in a poem dating to 1664, “Spare the rod, and spoil the child.”²⁶ If the Living Doll is eminently desirable to consume—if she is “good enough to eat”—the brat/monster is spoiled, a contaminant whose consumption will only cause harm to the consumer/spectator. This fear of contamination, located in the eating metaphor, describes the fervent mechanism of disavowal and the need to punish that characterizes this avatar/encounter.

One particularly salient example of this intertwining of the brat figure with over-consumption and spoilage is located in the family film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*.²⁷ Ostensibly, a family film, the movie, while wildly popular, has been a cause of trauma and fear in children for the past thirty years. The film centers on five children who win admittance to the much sought after Chocolate Factory, owned and operated by Willy Wonka (played by Gene Wilder), an eccentric and flamboyant man who is secretly looking for a replacement to run the factory upon his pending retirement. The magical tour through the factory succeeds in weeding out the four children apart from protagonist Golden Boy Charlie, whose purity of heart, modesty, and moderation keep him on the proper course (with a few exceptions) throughout the tour.

The boy is rewarded with the “keys to the castle” for his moderation, while the four competing Brats (Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt, Violet Beauregarde, and Mike TV) come to untimely ends through their gluttony and greed. These remaining children are disposed of in grotesque and violent, albeit comically presented ways. And while Wonka assures Charlie at the film’s end that the children will be restored to normal, the audience

never sees the children again. Thus, the perverse violence inflicted on them frames our visual encounters with them. The film stages a violent fantasy whereby children are deformed, tortured, and miniaturized for their excessive demands, evincing a violence not unlike Freud's beating fantasy that provided Cowie with her intervention in spectator theory. Even when narratives do not discipline the child in such explicit ways, spectator responses to the demanding child often indicate the desire to punish the child.

The child who cries too much, who eats too much, who needs a change of diapers too much may evoke a host of anxieties in the parent/spectator. Here I do not aim to give a strictly psychoanalytic account of the needs, demands, and desires that surface in the encounter with the brat. Yet, I would like to suggest several psychosocial factors that may describe the motivations of the spectator to have this particularly charged, vexed, even hostile engagement with the voracious child. The child who asserts an entitlement or set of demands may confront the spectator with instances of her own childhood where she passively watched as another child, perhaps sibling, received enviable attention due to his performance. The spectator may recollect his own childhood displays of attention-getting and the resulting shame in being rebuked or punished for his inappropriate demands.

The resulting need to dis-identify with the child embedded in the scene of shame or violence—a need that perhaps stems from fears of *over*-identification with the demanding child—may produce a response characterized by scorn, disavowal, even violence. It renders a phobic view of immaturity, positing the space of childhood as potentially monstrous Otherness, and shoring up mature masculinity or femininity as a

space of non-threatening autonomy and independence. The encounter with the brat/monster fuels a sort of punishment machine where aggression towards or around the filmic child and perhaps by extension, the spectator-as-child, becomes a visceral, potentially pleasurable one.

THE GOLDEN CHILD

The Golden Child has been the most difficult avatar to catalog in the course of this project, simply because I have not come up with one example that does not firmly belong, even primarily, in one of the other groupings. Needless to say almost all, if not all, filmic characterizations could easily fit under two or several rubrics, depending on the spectator's position—tendency to identify or desire particular qualities, whether narrative, visual, ideological. Yet, more than any other, the Golden Child seems to depend on another avatar for its articulation. I began with the assumption that the Golden Child—the subtypes of which I have labeled the “Proto-Citizen” and the “Proto-Hero”—would be the most ubiquitous child type. I envisioned it as the catch-all for hetero-normative narratives, where the generic (presumably white, middle-class, proto-hetero male) type would facilitate a structure of hetero-normative desire. Coming of age narratives would generally fall in this type, as would stories of young love. The Olsen Twins (themselves avatars of American girlhood—though many men envision them as nymphets as well), the boys from *Dead Poets Society*, and Daniel from *The Karate Kid* are instances. But I'm not convinced that these types belong more elsewhere. Daniel

from *The Karate Kid* might be read as the Outcast-Freak; the Olsen Twins, Nymphets; the *Dead Poets Society* boys variously as Freaks, Phantoms, and Epebes.

A premier example is Shirley Temple—while she is certainly a Living Doll, most of her roles have her in the position of an orphan, a poor girl. Of course, through the glamorization of her screen persona, these issues of class may play little interpretive importance. And the case of Little Orphan Annie seems important here too. In many ways, she is the “Proto-Citizen,” particularly in light of her promotion as a post-New Deal figure of optimism that promised hope to the down-trodden. Lee Edelman uses her as a prime example of the deployment of childhood to signify futurity (“Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love you tomorrow; you’re always a day away”). So, all this is to say is that many figures that stage a hetero-normative encounter with the promise of childhood innocence, futurity, and reproduction of the same. But these encounters all overlap with other, more complicated consideration of social status, etc.

Of course, this is one of my central propositions: that hetero-normative desire—perhaps more clearly understood as desires shaped around the preservation of hetero-normativity—always is imbricated in more complicated cultural discourses than it acknowledges. In this vein, I am not sure if the Golden Child does or should have the same avatar status as the others. This avatar fuels a narcissism machine, wherein the adult self is validated and amplified through the reassuring narrative and image of the child that promises a seamless trajectory from its present state of knowingness into a future competence and desire to reproduce heterosexual sameness.

THE NYMPHET/EPHEBE

The avatar of the Nymphet/Ephebe is discussed at great length in chapter three of the dissertation, but it is important to convey some of its defining characteristics and how it can be defined against these other categories of identification and desire. The subtypes I have employed within this avatar are the Vixen or Flirt and the Seductive Boy.

Nabokov's, and by extension Kubrick's and Lyne's, *Lolita* Haze becomes the quintessential reference point for this avatar. Any discussion of the liminal girl/woman's relation to the desiring adult is anchored in this literary and cultural figure. The Nymphet avatar generally describes a quickly maturing adolescent female, who has not yet left the safety of home, but who is increasingly aware of her sexual desires and her role as an object in the traffic in images.

This avatar does not exclusively encompass the cinematic girl. A space exists for discussing the boy's role in generating visual pleasure in this regard. Yet, there seems to be a dearth in these representations. Whereas boys, particularly adolescents, are often heavily aestheticized and can be discernible objects of desire, little cultural discussion occurs about their occupation of the role of filmic objects desired by adults. The Ephebe exists within the world of teen magazine pin-ups, announcing itself as the appropriate object of the gaze for the pre-pubescent or pubescent girl, but discourse about the desiring gaze surrounding the Ephebe is all but absent in discussions of adult female spectatorship. The issue of the desirability of young men or boys is more often left to reductive and homophobic discussions involving the queer perverse gaze. The strangeness of the concept of young male desirability is perhaps attributable to the

tendency to equate sexual or visual desire with *male* sexual/visual desire. Thus, something is inherently homoerotic about the objectification of the young male, in the presumption that the desiring gaze is, in fact, male.

Writer and feminist critic Germaine Greer published *The Beautiful Boy* in 2003, arguing that erotic representations of males, particularly young men or boys, have abounded throughout Western history (at least), but they have little been remarked on as sources of pleasure. Her aim of the book is “to advance women’s reclamation of their capacity for and right to visual pleasure.”²⁸ Greer seeks to articulate a structure of feminine desire that could cohere around the image of the Ephebe.

This structure of desire to be derived from the encounter with the Nymphet/Ephebe is grounded in the libidinal aspects of mirroring. The Nymphet/Ephebe as a mirroring machine generates an eroticization of youthful identification. This avatar arouses sexual desire through its presentation as an object choice that simultaneously engages the spectator in identification with innocence and its environs and shores up his/her mature masculinity or femininity through his/her privileged status as bearer of the look. It is within the avatar of the Nymphet/Ephebe that Mulvey’s account of power and the visual gaze has the most resonance. Imbued with the sexualized, voyeuristic impulse, it generates the power-saturated scopophilic gaze.

THE PHANTOM

The machinery of melancholia and masochistic identification is most prevalent in the avatar of the Phantom. Its subtypes include the Victim, the Ghost, the Poor Child, the

Martyr, and the Lost Child. The designation Phantom fits this cluster of identifications through its bestowal of a sense of loss. The child figure within these generic configurations is an absent presence—one that conjures a need for mourning. Not surprisingly, this avatar often fits within the economy of the melodrama and other fictions of sensation. Figures such as Oliver Twist, Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Andersen's Little Match Girl function as representatives of this cluster. More contemporary manifestations of this type are to be found in the films of Atom Egoyan, the dead sons in Lawrence Kasdan's *The Accidental Tourist* and Robert Redford's *Ordinary People*, and JonBenet Ramsey in *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town*. And in the following chapter, I offer the case of Haley Joel Osment's Cole Sear in *The Sixth Sense* as an encounter with the Phantom.

The child figured in these films is often, in fact, not figured at all, or presented only in flashback. Her absence becomes the salient point of her characterization. The missing or mourned child, which generates a greater existential sense of loss, produces a kind of nostalgia, a yearning for an innocence connected to a personal sense of past, albeit a very different kind from that produced by the Living Doll. Whereas the spectator of the Living Doll negotiates a lost sense of childhood self through fetishizing the child as miniature adult, the spectator engaged in the machine of melancholia encounters the child quite differently. This spectator, rather than fetishizing the body of the child as access to the past, fetishizes the lost object as one perhaps unrecoverable; the child as locus of mourning becomes the fetishistic substitute for an irretrievable innocence or identity based on the pre-interpellation of adult subjectivity. The absently present child

facilitates an elegiac mode that may become its own testing grounds for the expression of the adult spectator's "lost" relation to childhood innocence.

Emma Wilson offers in her study *Cinema's Missing Children* an analysis of lost childhood as it is depicted in independent cinema. She argues that Hollywood film, for the most part, includes the theme of missing or dead children to bolster more foregrounded plots of recrimination and revenge, thereby foreclosing meditation on loss and reparation as psychic matters that are not easily resolved in favor of tidier means of narrative closure. In opposition to this "reparative illusion" to be found within Hollywood films, she argues that independent films more often foster "a material form in which doubts about the return, the reanimation, the fantasy, the phantom of the missing child, can be tested, played out or dismissed. Such mourning rituals frequently depend on disavowal, a disavowal which cinema as medium at once of photographic realism and reparative, commemorative, knowing illusion, seems particularly apt to represent."²⁹

I am not convinced that independent film, in its more experimental narrative and formal strategies, is the only facilitator of complex melancholic feeling surrounding lost children. As an example, I would argue that Kasdan's *The Accidental Tourist*, while adhering to many conventions of Hollywood cinema, including the remarriage plot that occurs after the tumultuous death of the protagonist's son, allows ample space, both in its narrative and in particular its *mise-en-scène*, for the protracted and important contemplation of loss. However, I am in concert with Wilson's allowances that cinema may engage the exploration of disavowal, reparation, and doubt that surrounds loss.

More pointedly, the cinematic Phantom child, whether bodied or disembodied, allows for an intimate exploration of loss in relation to the spectator's sense of self.

THE FREAK

A shared sense of abjection characterizes the avatars of the Phantom and the Freak. The distinction I make here involves the structure of desire that emanates from the encounter with the filmic child. Whereas the Phantom facilitates an experience of melancholia, a reified and lingering sense of loss and its (potential for) integration into the self, the Freak child promotes a negotiation of the formerly stigmatized child self into a new narrative frame. The subtypes encompassed by this avatar are the Alien, the Nerd, the Gender Dissonant, and the Outcast. As a structure of desire, the spectator's encounter with the Freak tests and expands the limits of relationality, of identifications that were not permitted to the spectator in her childhood. The Freak's enunciation, as a machine of relationality, reframes marginal positions as central narrative and visual points of identification.

Examples of the Freak's enunciating capabilities are articulated in chapter two of the dissertation. The roles of Haley Joel Osment, particularly of Cole Sear in *The Sixth Sense* and of David in *AI: Artificial Intelligence*, exemplify the potential of imaginative reworkings of positions of shame or stigmatization within the receptive spectator. Of course, the spectator's active dis-identification with the Freak could prompt a further reinforcement of non-relationality, though, in that case, I would classify his avatar response as being more akin to the Brat, wherein the (imagined) demands of the child

figure for acceptance or shared identification are negated in a violent process of disavowal.

The Freak child figure's embodiment, whether as the Nerd—the representation of dominant social forces' relegation of the child to the socially marginal—or the Alien—the consignment of the child to an otherworldly and inhuman status—troubles a conventional model of childhood development; one, through its pleasurable refusal to accommodate hetero-normative connections of desirability with modes of knowing and imparting knowledge; and the other, through its imagining different ontologies of childhood. The spectator may latch on to these marginal representations of the Freak and re-evaluate her status as child-outsider in its movement towards narrative and visual centrality through filmic engagement. The identifications generated through this re-appraisal of the status of represented childhood—its bestowal of agency to perform different modes of being—may erect an erotics of relationality that re-energizes the spectator's relation to gendered, sexualized, and other ways of inhabiting the social.

The Child's Hand and the Erotics of Manipulation

This chapter advances a taxonomy of the child-as-avatar to address the lack of attention devoted to the sophisticated description of children's representation and reception in film scholarship. It does so also to counter the dismissive and reductive characterizations of filmic children and child actors in popular discourse. Although I have outlined six semi-distinct machines that drive contradictory spectator responses to the filmic child, public discussion of children's roles in the cinema too often veers in one

direction—the child as Brat. The recourse to writing off children as Brats has a long history in Hollywood. W. C. Fields long ago remarked that no one in Hollywood should work with children or animals, lest they be upstaged by non-professionals. The idea that children (and animals) “steal scenes” immediately situates them outside the realm of the aesthetic, the artistic, or the professional. It also sets up a dichotomy of the adult/actor-craftsman and the child/amateur who must seize the spectator’s attention through *manipulation*.

The term manipulation crops up again and again in reference to child stars and the child’s filmic image. Just as the term so often has been deployed to account for low cultural status, to mark emphatically a text’s pandering to base and bodily reactions, as in the case of melodrama, so too has manipulation come to reference a cheap and compromising less-than-aesthetic experience. Critics like Linda Williams and Richard Dyer have pointed to the consignment of “body genres,” which are thought to anchor their impact in corporeal response, like horror, pornography, and comedy, to the lower echelons of taste cultures. Likewise, calling a text “manipulative” has the effect of removing it from high aesthetic valuation.

The word “manipulation” has its roots in the Latin *manus*, for hand, and subsequently *maniple*, the French for “handful of grain.” Clearly, these etymological roots produce a host of connotations: the hand that jerks the strings of a puppet, perhaps; the hand that pulls at heartstrings; the child’s hand (more precisely, her palm) out of which the audience eats. All of these references imagine a child’s hand wielding an unnatural and indecent power. When critics and spectators (as countless have done) refer

to Shirley Temple as having the audience “eat out of the palm of her hand,” they do so with vastly different attitudes about this description. To many, this act of consumption from the child’s hand is a salutary surrender to the virtues of her childishness or innocence. It playfully describes the adult’s fixation on her innocence, designating the spectator as happily subordinate to or dependent on her charms. To others, this representation that beckons to subordinate or enthrall the spectator to the child is artificial, unnatural, threatening his integrity.

The fear of manipulation, symptomized by the need to degrade the child-text and thus the child-figure as low, trivial, or somehow prurient, reveals the threat of over-attachment to the child which may result in the spectator’s unwelcome femininization, infantilization, or eroticized identification with the child. The abject embarrassment associated with the “awwwww” reaction to the child’s cuteness, with fawning over the performance of juvenility, is deeply rooted in a phobic-because-unstable adult subject position that attempts to define itself in opposition to the child.

The very metaphors inherent in the term manipulation, with their emphasis on the unnatural maneuverings of the body—whether tugging on heartstrings or cupping the hands to feed the audience—bespeak a fear that engagement or attachment to the filmic child may become suddenly visceral, that the child’s body will become instrumental in the bodily arousal of the adult. The metaphors of the corporeal that have come to describe child-gazing are unattractive, even grossly untenable for the adult spectator of contemporary culture, whose hyper-vigilance surrounding children, desire, and bodily contact necessitates a psychic disavowal of these associations. Thus, the somewhat

irrational distinctions between high and low culture vis-à-vis the texts' relation to bodily impact become markers of taste as well as of social propriety. Ignoring the fact that highly esteemed genres like the historical epic, or the tragedy are theorized to provide catharsis through bodily stimulation and visceral engagement, the manipulations of the child-image are construed as bestowing a vulgar, involuntary, and degenerate bodily involvement.

This chapter opened with a gloss of the ways literary critics have theorized the adult reader and author's relation to textual representations of childhood and come to understand adults' desires for and fears of those desires around children as paramount in understanding the literary production and consumption of child texts. I then extended this inquiry into visual culture, particularly the cinematic apparatus, in an attempt to grapple with the dynamics of juvenile desires that have not been broached in public discourse, except through crude and often homophobic constructions of pedophilic genitality. I turn back to the literary in my closing section in order to foreground the queer stakes in re-evaluating or evaluating anew the erotic dynamics of child spectatorship.

In her essay "Queer Performativity," Sedgwick explains Henry James's own nostalgic struggles to understand his relationship to his early writerly self. Sedgwick understands James' self-relation to be an erotic one. She muses, "[T]he very distance of these self-figurations from the speaking self of the present is marked, treasured and in fact eroticized."³⁰ She suggests that the metaphor of the "Inner Child," however vulgarized through its circulation in pop psychological discourse, is very much operative

in the Henry James of the *Prefaces*. She argues that the metaphor of the Inner Child “presents one’s relation to one’s own past as a relationship, intersubjective as it is intergenerational. And, it might be added, almost by definition homoerotic.”

Sedgwick cautions against the impulse within pop psychology to see this contact with the Inner Child as being “solvable” through some kind of healing dialogue or a merging of the identities of youth and adult. Rather, she hypothesizes, “The speaking self of the *Prefaces* does not attempt to merge with the potentially shaming or shamed figurations of its younger self, younger fictions, younger heroes; its attempt is to love them.... James offers a variety of reasons for being embarrassed by these waifs of his past, but the persistence with which shame accompanies their repeated conjuration is matched by the persistence with which, in turn, he describes himself as cathecting or eroticizing that very shame as a way of coming into loving relation to queer or ‘compromising’ youth.”³¹

I suggest that, while Sedgwick uses this metaphor of the Inner Child to denote one’s relation to one’s own earlier “self” and its attempt to “love” it, that this metaphor may characterize the adult reader/spectator’s relation to fictive childhood “selves” more generally. This intimate connection to one’s own sense of past is enabled even through fictive representations of the child. Knoepfmacher’s assertion that child texts involve the “adult reactivation of childhood selves that all of us harbor” holds true, I believe, with the cinematic encounter with the child figure; it is a figure that we at once recognize and misrecognize as our selves. The complex meshing of identification and desires evoked by our temporal and spatial orientation to the child takes radically different forms, as I have demonstrated through my introduction of the child avatars.

Adult responses to these avatars, whether these relations involve the combining of them or vacillating among them, gauge the eroticized identifications that swell, intensify, wane, or are violently severed; we are forced to see the complexities of our investments in the child figure to provide pleasure, to challenge our identities and our self-narratives of development and differentiation, and to tweak our sense of relationality. Whether in the spirit of celebration, scorn, contempt, shame, admiration, adoration, atonement, forgiveness, perplexity, envy, condescension, or joy, our encounters with the figural child are never sterile or static. Even disinterest in the child is dynamic.

In the following chapters, I shall keep these avatars implicitly operative as descriptive of the adult encounter with the child. It is crucial to remember that these avatars are not intended to be read as stock signs—as some sort of Jungian apparatus of the archetype. Reading them in this way would only replicate the reductive subject-object model of the gaze that I have attempted to escape or dispel in this schematization of fantasy and desiring machines. Instead, these avatars should reference a structure of desire that emanates within spectatorship.

In chapter two of this dissertation, I will take the case of Haley Joel Osment to show how the avatar of the Freak may intertwine or touch productively the Golden Child and Phantom Child figure through queer representational strategies. In chapter three, I demonstrate the difficulties spectators have in negotiating their encounter with the Nymphet/Ephebe, situated as it is on the precipice of actualized sexual desire. I also examine the stakes of pre-adolescent same-sex objectification in the film *Happiness* to understand how spectators bring to bear various assumptions about pedophilia to evaluate

the film's artistry. In chapter four, I take the case of murdered beauty pageant queen JonBenet Ramsey to show how differing cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, and maturation enable her to be read variously as a Living Doll, Nymphet/Ephebe, or Phantom. I do so in the hopes of encouraging further inquiry to the child as a semiotically complex, and politically necessary, subject and object of study in visual culture.

¹ Knoepfelmacher, U. C. *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. xv.

² Knoepfelmacher xii.

³ *Ibid.* vix.

⁴ Rose, Jacqueline. *Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.

⁵ Rose (p. #)

⁶ Kincaid, James. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994., p. 6-7.

⁷ Kincaid 7.

⁸ *Ibid.* 10.

⁹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Queer and Now". *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. pp. 6-7

¹⁰ Berlant, Lauren. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 5.

¹² Fung, Richard. "Looking For My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn". *How Do I Look?* Bay Press, 1991.

¹³ De Lauretis, Teresa, "On the Subject of Fantasy," in *Feminisms in the Cinema*, Laura Pietropaolo and Ada Testaferri eds, Bloomington: Indiana UP 1995, pp. 63-85.

¹⁴ Metz, Christian. 1975, "Story/Discourse: Notes on Two Kinds of Voyeurism". *Movies and Methods: Volume 2*. Ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. pp. 543-549.

¹⁵ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen 16*: 1975. pp. 6-18.

¹⁶ Studlar, Gaylyn. "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema". Ed. Bill Nichols. *Movies and Methods 2*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 2: 610. cited in McGowan, Todd. "Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes". *Cinema Journal* 42, No. 3, Spring, 2003, pp. 27-47. p. 31.

¹⁷ McGowan 31.

¹⁸ Cowie, Elizabeth. "Fantasia". *m/f*: 9: 71-104.

¹⁹ Child star Jackie Coogan, who starred in Chaplin's 1921 *The Kid* and 1923 *Daddy* may provide an instance of the boy-Living Doll in his reception.

²⁰ Kincaid 7.

²¹ Walkerdine, Valerie. "Popular Culture and the Eroticization of Little Girls" *The Children's Culture Reader*. Ed. Henry Jenkins. New York & London: NYU Press, 1998. p. 259 (254-265)

²² *The Barbies Collectible 2005 Line*.

<http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:Szs52rHTjdAJ:michellesbarbies.8m.net/photo3.html+%22good+enough+to+eat%22+dolls&hl=en>

²³ For a discussion of ideology and the commodification and consumption of cuteness, see Merish, Lori.

"Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple." *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. Ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson. New York: New York UP, 1996. 185-203.

²⁴ Mother Goose rhymes were introduced in England in the early nineteenth century when translated from Charles Perrault's French folk tales dating back to 1697.

²⁵ I am using need, demand, and desire rather interchangeably here, and in doing so am trying to get away from a strictly Lacanian understanding of the child's ways of wanting and asserting its will. I differentiate my description here from Lacanian language, because I am using these terms to designate the spectators' own needs or recollection of her needs as a child as well, so it behooves me to distance myself from the more strict Lacanian account of the trajectory from needs to desires to demands.

²⁶ The phrase is commonly misattributed to the Christian bible, but does not appear there. However, several proverbs that indicate the same sentiment. "Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from Hell." Proverb 23:14.

²⁷ Dir. Mel Stuart. *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Wolper Productions, 1971.

²⁸ Greer, Germaine. *The Beautiful Boy*. Rizzoli Press, 2003.

²⁹ Wilson, Emma. *Cinema's Missing Children*. London: Wallflower Press, 2003. p. 8.

³⁰ See Eve Sedgwick's "Queer Performativity."

³¹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2

The Child Who Knew Too Much: Childhood Alterity and the Case of Haley Joel Osment

Queer children populate the stories that have already been told about children and even the stories we tell to children in a Wizard of Oz sense: they've been there all along if we'd only known where to look.¹

In 1979, German scholar of trauma theory and humanist psychology Alice Miller published her landmark study *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*. The book, later re-titled *The Prison of Childhood*, ushered in an immense body of recovery and self-help literature, notably popular discussions of the Inner Child and the therapeutic importance of reconnecting with an earlier self, wounded through childhood trauma.² Departing from, or elaborating on, earlier work in ego and depth psychology which addresses the repression or sublimation of acute traumas in formative experience (the primal scene and consequent Oedipal moments) and the traumas' manifestations in adult subjects, Miller addresses the psychic wounding inherent in more quotidian aspects of the lives of children whose thoughts and desires are ignored, misunderstood, or trivialized by parent figures. She argues that this early wounding almost invariably produces depression in adulthood, which fails to be remedied by the subject's taking on parenthood and repeating the cycle of emotional negligence and abuse of power.

Over twenty years after its first publication, Miller's assertion that the child is an important and complex being, with multi-faceted and deeply impressing perceptions, desires, and fears, and that "the child has a primary need from the very beginning of her life to be regarded and respected as the person she really is at any given time," may seem commonplace or of dubious scholarly use.³ This focus on individual histories of emotional life is regularly denigrated by academia and large sectors of public culture, attached as it has become to scornful accusations of "victimization rhetoric" that functions as an evasion of personal accountability. The talk of emotion and its importance, Jane Tompkins ruefully remarks, "smacks of the touchy-feely, the Mickey Mouse" and becomes mute in an academic discourse so firmly committed to "founding knowledge in the denial of emotion."⁴

The proliferation of the "touchy-feely" within degraded and often feminized public forms of discussion like tell-all memoirs, day-time talk shows, and televised biographies has furthered allegations that discussion of one's relation to childhood and its psychic impact adds up to self-indulgent malingering. What is more, the emphasis on formative childhood experiences so often conjures the catastrophic debates prominent in the 1980s surrounding false versus recovered memories of abuse, which culminated in a kind of cultural hysteria and produced scapegoats for allegedly imagined experiences of abuse.⁵ The public back-and-forth of irreconcilably polarized views on whether childhood memory is opaque or transparent has embittered many on the subjects of psychoanalysis and therapeutic practices that embrace the emotional excavation of early life.

Finally, Miller's emphasis on the child's "true self" may seem passé in the wake of poststructuralist and Lacanian thinking that troubles the notion of a "true" or unified self. Many psychologists writing on narcissism and the integration of self have come under attack for their uncritical take on the ego as solidly and discretely structured. Thus, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*'s account of the "search for the self" may appear to poststructuralists a naïve romanticization of both a coherent self and a lost childhood.

Despite these potential reservations, Miller's argument offers a bracing reassessment of childhood as an interpersonal site of identity formation. Her insistence that children have needs for "respect, echoing, understanding, sympathy, and mirroring" is valuable in suggesting that self-perceptions of inadequacy and alienation stem from early failures in interpersonal communication.⁶ Most pertinent to *this* study is her appropriation of the term "giftedness" to describe the condition of the alienated child. While "giftedness" has existed in educational and psychological parlance to describe children with high levels of performance or potential in intellectual, artistic, or physical endeavors, Miller delves into the ontology of "giftedness," instead emphasizing the psychic processes that may motivate exceptional performance or modes of being. Rather than reducing giftedness to a mystified sense of innate superiority or acumen, she marks giftedness as sign of a burden—a fruitless burden of seeking parental love and respect through success or high performance. She portrays the gifted child as one who, of necessity, must refute the promise of unconditional love and develop interior resources for coping with an existence marked by estrangement or fundamental difference. Giftedness, then, characterizes a state of seeking approval or self worth through

achievement, a search for a surrogate that would generate returned respect or affection. The gifted child occupies himself in finding instruments of compensation or restitution for a perceived lack of love.

Miller's use of case histories of adult depression and its linkages to childhood abjection across gender, race, and class identifications has lent the book a credibility and a sense of universality for many critics.⁷ The question of the book's capacity to account for a kind of universalized childhood experience, easily open for debate, is not a concern of this chapter; rather, its import lies in how Miller's discussion of *giftedness* in children presages work within queer theory that grapples with the queer adult subject's relation to a proto-homosexual or transgendered childhood identity. The giftedness that Miller introduces in her text may be a useful heuristic for mining a queer model of the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender adult's strategies for acknowledging, understanding, and bringing into narrative her own existence as a queer child. Equally importantly, the theoretical relation of Miller's idea of giftedness to more recent accounts of queerness, though by no means symmetrical, synonymous, or soundly analogous, is important to explore in order to understand how queer subjects may derive interpretive pleasure and empowerment from representations, whether visual or narrative, fictitious or biographical, of the gifted child. I would also argue that queer childhood experience is not solely the province of GLBT identity and that non-GLBT subjects who experienced other forms of childhood estrangement may find similar pleasures in the semiotics of giftedness.

This chapter derives its title both from the two Alfred Hitchcock films *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, wherein a protagonist stumbles upon information not intended for him and loses his child for having acquired that forbidden knowledge, as well as to Tania Modleski's work *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, a feminist examination of women's vexed relation to knowledge and agency within the Hitchcock oeuvre. It addresses the cultural problem of knowledgeable children by reading the reception of the gifted child through the lens of competing discourses of heteronormativity and queerness—discourses that situate the child figure in profoundly different ways regarding its access to knowledge and agency. The chapter focuses on how a semiotics of giftedness within cinematic representations of children may produce visual and narrative pleasure in queer viewers, as well as how giftedness may be perceived, if only obliquely or subliminally, as a marker of juvenile queerness by hetero-normative audiences.

Lee Edelman has argued persuasively in his 1997 essay "Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive" that the child in America is the supreme figure of futurity, of innocence, that it is the "telos of the social order," that its figural presence reassures us of our own stability as subjects; children become the premium symbol of futurity—a future marked by the guaranteed reproduction of the same. Consequently, Edelman argues, queers--because they signify non-procreativity, a rupture in the nuclear family and the reproduction of the same, dangerous sexuality--are constructed as a threat to the child.

This chapter seeks to redress this distorted view of the relation between children and queer subjects, but it does not aim to disavow the question of the ways desire for or identification with images of children may structure cinematic experiences. The question of visceral response to and psychic engagement with

the figural child will remain a constant tension in this analysis; I am trying to complicate the reductive understanding of how children are exploited and objectified through the projection of their filmic bodies, while insisting that children can be vehicles of desire and wish fulfillment in the form of a mediated embodiment. I argue that the representation of the gifted child, often connotative of a nascent queer sexuality, may generate queer pleasure that emanates, alternately, from recognition, masochistic identification, and the process of imaginatively reworking or recovering memories and identities marked by stigma and trauma.

The recent volume *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* clears a space for theorizing sexual inclinations, drives, sensibilities, and growths within the space of childhood. The editors of the anthology expose the regimes that comply with the sterilized view of children as asexual or pre-sexual and describe the ways children are denied access to an immediate sexuality through conventions of narrative and political discourse. Describing a juvenile queerness that can only be accessed through the future anterior tense, they point to examples like *Alice in Wonderland*, where a queer childhood can only exist retrospectively and in its contained recollection. That is to say, a queer childhood can only be articulated as a space that has already been surpassed and foreclosed and put in the service of a narrative that leads to a mature heterosexual *telos*. Read: “I *will have been* queer, once I forego my childhood and reflect on what brought me to my current state of adult normalcy.” This chapter examines how filmic

representations of the gifted child might afford a narrative space for proto-gay children that does not require its own foreclosing through its expression and permit the reclamation of a queer childhood identity that heralds an unapologetic queer teleology.

One of queer spectators' pleasures to be gleaned in watching precocious or "odd" children lies in the viewers' ability to synthesize or reconstruct a particular identity or structure of feeling for the child subject that was denied to them in their own childhood. This denial of available identifications comes not only in the form of explicitly sexual identifications that are proscribed by the heteronormative insistence that children are asexual. Rather, other fundamental ways of inhabiting a social space are denied queer children vis-à-vis the expectations of gender performance in children—their emotive expressions, their assimilations into homogeneous peer groups, the intensity of parental attachments, their interest and degree of faith in imitating heterosexual domesticity, and other indices for evaluating childhood normalcy.

In this chapter, I turn to Haley Joel Osment here to make a case for the validity and the psychic importance of these viewing pleasures. Through a reading of his three major films, *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Pay It Forward* (2000), and *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), I offer a glimpse of the queer semiotic field that surrounds his work and suggest that these codes offer the queer viewer the narrativization--the radical bringing into existence--of the experiences of a queer child.

In reading these texts through this optic, I have no intention of addressing the sexual proclivities or identities of Haley Joel Osment or the characters he portrays. I don't attribute these queer readings to the intentions of the directors or producers of the films in question. I merely look into how Osment's performances may resonate with queer audiences in ways that are not manifest through their commercial packaging or established reception history. After reading the queer elements of these films, I turn to Internet responses to the image and star persona of Osment in order to make a case for the widespread recognition of Osment's child-heroes as sites of queer identification, as well as to demonstrate how audiences who only obliquely perceive the queerness of his characters exhibit distrust in the notion of the improperly knowledgeable child. Put otherwise, with an eye towards the typology I established in chapter one, I track the ways in which queer and hetero-normative identities forge conflicting and various connections to the avatars of the Freak, Phantom, Golden Child, and Brat within Osment's film work.

Haley Joel Osment's Queer Oeuvre

Haley Joel Osment, born in 1988, has enjoyed tremendous success in film and television over the last thirteen years. Beginning as a child actor and model at the age of four, he secured roles in Hollywood films very early on, including the blockbuster *Forrest Gump* (1994). It was not until the 1999 premiere of the critical and commercial behemoth *The Sixth Sense*, however, that Osment became a formidable presence in popular iconography and public discourse. Osment's nomination for a Golden Globe and

an Academy Award for his universally acknowledged impressive performance at age ten in M. Night Shyamalan's supernatural thriller propelled him into popular consciousness. Osment went on to sign on for major roles in Mimi Leder's *Pay It Forward*, Stanley Kubrick and Stephen Spielberg's *AI*, the children's movie *The Country Bears*, and the coming-of-age drama *Second Hand Lions*. Osment continues to generate a buzz in the industry and in America's living rooms and chat rooms, as is evident in the number of articles and websites devoted to him and his body of work.

In *The Sixth Sense*, Osment plays eight-year-old Cole Sear, an only child growing up with his single working-class mother in Philadelphia, who has the secret gift of communicating with the dead. Bullied by children and teachers alike at school for his eerie knowingness and misunderstood by his worrying mother, Cole is forced to face this knowledge of the dead, who are constantly seeking him out to attempt reconciliation with the living. The film stages a purgatorial cosmology, where deceased wander the Earth seeking resolution for their incumbent between-ness.⁸

Throughout the film, Cole is forced to hide his abilities as a medium until he apparently finally confides it in child psychologist Malcolm Crowe (played by Bruce Willis). The film resolves with Cole's final admission to his mother that he can communicate with the Dead and with the revelation that Malcolm the psychologist has been dead all along--that Malcolm, like many of the other walking dead, is in denial of his situation and deluded in believing that he still interacts with the living.

It is not difficult to read the film's trajectory as a fairly straightforward queer allegory, as a classic coming out story. Cole resonates with the plight of the queer child--

the one who has a secret, who leads a double-life, who is able to see people that others cannot, those who have been rendered invisible by society. The ability to “see dead people walking around” conjures the idea of an open secret. The exterior shots of Cole’s experience in urban Philadelphia, combined with his perceptions of the walking dead in his own home, generate this sense of an open secret, with its attendant shame and duplicity. Through the logic of this coding, Malcolm can be read as queer as well; his denial of his condition (foreshadowed early in the film by Cole, who reports that many of the Dead have not yet come to terms with their separate existence from the living, that they have refused to see themselves as Other) becomes a fairly transparent representation of sexual closetedness. Several key scenes should illuminate the queer subtext and allegorical power that pervade Shyamalan’s text for readers seeking this.

The film opens with a scene of celebration between Malcolm and his wife; Malcolm (who is alive at the beginning of the film) has just received a citation from the Mayor of Philadelphia for his exceptional work with troubled children. A romantic celebration at home goes awry as the couple discovers an intruder in their home, whom Malcolm initially takes to be a drug addict in search of a fix. As Malcolm confronts the boy intruder, he realizes that this haggard young man before him is, in fact, one of his patients from ten years ago, a child he diagnosed as having a “possible mood disorder” and “acute anxiety”—a child whom he failed to help. A distraught Malcolm recognizes the boy as his former patient, saying, “Vincent Gray. I do remember you. You were quiet. Smart. Compassionate. Unusually compassionate.” Vincent retorts, “You forgot, ‘Cursed.’” In desperation, Vincent lambastes, “You failed me! You failed me!” and

shoots Malcolm before turning the gun on himself. As a felled Malcolm, attended by his wife, whispers the name “Vincent,” the camera zooms out and the screen fades to black.

The screen then reads, “The Next Fall,” indicating the passage of time before we are introduced to child protagonist Cole. Nairn’s placement of the ellipsis here sets up the narrative trick of the film. When we again see Malcolm in the Fall, poised for a meeting with Cole, who is apparently a new patient of his, the logical narrative assumption is that he has healed over the time lapse, and is resuming his normal practice. The film’s conclusion, though, reveals that Malcolm has in fact died as a result of the wound inflicted by Vincent and has not acknowledged his mortality. Thus, the assumption that he is still alive and a practicing therapist is overturned, revealing that he is, unbeknownst to himself, another of the ghosts who visit Cole, hoping to make amends for their mortal wrongs—in this case, for having misdiagnosed the precocious “cursed” Vincent.

Osment’s Cole is first introduced through Malcolm’s point of view. Malcolm, who sits outside Cole’s apartment, pores over Cole’s case profile. Outlined are certain key phrases that echo the profile of the now-dead Vincent. The highlighting of the phrases “possible mood disorder,” “acute anxiety,” and “problems with socialization” not only recalls the pathologies used to characterize and misdiagnose the previous patient Vincent, but also suggest the ways in which queer children are pathologized in terms of their early behavioral patterns and interpersonal relationships. Thus, before the visual introduction to Cole, the profile already sets forth the terms of his social reception.

Malcolm gazes at an opening door, where diminutive Cole emerges, nervous, taut, and in oversized glasses that virtually mask his entire face. Malcolm watches as Cole sprints down the street, glancing nervously around to see if he is being observed. Following Cole into a looming Catholic church, Malcolm introduces himself to a wary Cole as his new therapist. Tellingly, Malcolm, in order to gain trust in Cole, remarks that in medieval Europe, people would seek sanctuary in a church. When Cole asks from whom, Malcolm responds, “Bad people. People that wanted to put them in jail. People who wanted to hurt them.” That Malcolm’s explanation resonates with Cole suggests that the church serves a similar function for himself. Clearly, he identifies with the position of needing refuge and fearing imprisonment or harm for his difference. This identification is one of the first potentially queer signifiers that characterize Cole. The tendency for queer children to seek refuge in the church (or faith, more generally) to make sense of, atone for, or escape their different desires perhaps registers as part of Cole’s motivations.

As Malcolm notices Cole playing with several figurines in the pew of the church, he inquires about the conversation he seems to be having with his toy figure. When he asks what the figurine tells him, Cole recites, “*De profundis clamo ad te, Domine.*” This exchange becomes the first suggestion of Cole’s supernatural abilities. It is later when Malcolm translates the Latin phrase, “From the depths, I call to you, O Lord,” that he begins to fathom Cole’s capacities. Cole’s use of the Vulgate Biblical Latin, from Psalm 130, is interesting in the context of a queer reading as well, since the prayer refers not only to a sinner’s lamentation, but also is the title of Oscar Wilde’s impassioned letter to

his lover Alfred Douglas, written during his incarceration for sodomy shortly before his death. Cole's social abjection that results from his supernatural abilities becomes articulated in the very prayer he "hears" from his figurine.

Another facet of *The Sixth Sense* that opens itself up to queer readings beyond the features of Cole's character is the unconventional, yet relatively central coupling of Cole with Malcolm—a pairing that is secretive, same-sex, mentor-oriented, and ultimately discovered to be supernatural.⁹ While no overt eroticism characterizes the relationship of the two characters, the film establishes a strong affective, almost codependent bond between a boy and an adult male who lies outside the nuclear family and, in doing so, opens a space for imagining the coupling as a pederastic arrangement.

One scene in particular demonstrates the pronounced allegorical structures of the film's coming-out narrative. After Cole is hospitalized with wounds incurred from one of his many encounters with the Dead, he chooses to confide in Malcolm, in whom he has built considerable trust for listening to his pronouncements of feeling different without judgment or disbelief. He says with hesitation, "I'm ready to tell you my secret now." As Malcolm listens with interest, the camera zooms in on Cole's pale, over-lit face. He reveals, "I see dead people." Malcolm counters, "On TV? In movies?" Cole responds, "No. Walking around. All the time." Cole's admission to Malcolm at this point in the film, though at first dismissed by the therapist as part of Cole's neurosis, ultimately leads to the recognition that his powers of communicating with the Dead can be productive and put in the service of restoring interpersonal relationships.

The queer pleasures to be derived from *The Sixth Sense* and from Osment's portrayal of Cole stem from an identification with childhood abjection. The portrayal of Cole allows the viewer, in particular the queer viewer, to recognize the narrative of his/her own sense of difference as a child.¹⁰ This child "who knows too much" is significant to queer audiences. Eve Sedgwick, in her book *A Dialogue on Love*, muses that growing up as a queer child means being hyper-attentive to social codes, hyper-aware that one's desires do not match up to the codes that are operative in the environment; that being queer often means feeling split, secretive, ambiguous. The representation of Cole in *The Sixth Sense* shows the alienation and shame that can result from feeling different, but also represents this dislocation as the fantasy of having a gift, of transcending the ordinary.

In the end of the film, when Cole reveals his secret to his mother, he proves his gift by telling his mother something that her own mother had confided in him after her death, revealing both that his gift is genuine and that her mother had actually loved her daughter very much. The fact that Cole uses his gift to bond his family more closely together is a fantasy itself, as the revelation of his difference restores family unity. This narrative trajectory, as opposed to the more prominent one of the coming-out story, whereby families are dismantled through the recognition that the reproduction of the heterosexual same has broken down, is a fantastic re-imagining of the self-revelation of the gifted or queer child. If the film's opening with "cursed" Vincent Gray provides a dystopic fate for the child who knows too much, the film re-writes Cole's child-hero's

knowingness as one that begins in shame but ends in a restored love and heightened self-understanding of the queer child's relation to family and the social more generally.

In Mimi Leder's 2000 *Pay It Forward*, Osment portrays Trevor McKinney, an eleven-year-old boy raised (again) by a single mother, with an alternately absent and violent father figure, who abuses mother Arlene (Helen Hunt). The film centers on Trevor's youthfully optimistic plan to change the world by starting a chain of "good will" actions; the premise is that a good deed should not be returned but instead, should be "paid forward" to three different people in need. Included in his actions of good will is his attempt to couple his mother with his Social Studies teacher who inspired the plan in the first place—a reclusive burn victim named Eugene Simonet (Kevin Spacey). Ultimately, Trevor's plan succeeds, including the probable coupling of his mother and teacher, but, at the film's end, school bullies kill Trevor. After this happens, an enormous vigil is held for him populated by media and people from all over Nevada and California.

Osment's character Trevor is the heart of a maudlin melodrama. The queer signifiers with which he comes to be associated in the film are similar to those of *The Sixth Sense*. Trevor occupies an outsider status, being markedly smaller than his peers; he is clearly stigmatized by his working-class roots and his mother's alcoholism; his clothes at school mark him as the product of blue-collar life. What is more, his final death at the hands of school bullies is resonant in this age of children being bashed for what is perceived as their weakness, effeminacy, or homosexuality.¹¹ To be precise, Trevor is ultimately beaten not for his own weakness but for his having stood up for a

small, helpless child, an even more diminutive version of himself. His attempt to intervene in the assault brings about his death.

Another aspect of his characterization that may be read as queer is his unique relationship with his mother. He is hardly dependent on his mother, but instead is more companionate. He advises her about what to wear on her dates with Eugene; he orchestrates a candle-lit dinner for them, playing the persistent matchmaker. In stereotypically gay fashion, Trevor is instrumental in generating an atmosphere of heterosexual courtship, devising its *mise-en-scène* and tailoring the romance plot in breathless hope of uniting his mother and teacher. For an eleven-year-old, he is strangely in tune with his mother's inner life, with her desires and motivations. The representation of Trevor as martyr, as the child with the heart of gold, as the face of optimism and futurity in a sorrowful world, also constitutes a queer fantasy of sorts. Granted, it can be argued that most children have a fantasy of martyrdom, of being appreciated and loved by all for their sacrifice, but I would suggest that the idea of being the "perfect boy" is often a preoccupation of queer children who, in a culture that valorizes a masculinity that is not available to them, must resort to other forms of accomplishment and "good behavior" to compensate. Trevor's Millerian "giftedness," his burden of being different, precocious, and sacrificially predisposed to securing his family, facilitates a queer allegory vis-à-vis the gay child's relation to family.

Yet again, like in *The Sixth Sense*, Osment's character forms a strong attachment to an adult male who is outside of the nuclear family structure—which thus may be read as queer. Of course, one could argue that Eugene is meant to reconstruct the nuclear

family and restore a heterosexual paternalism, but if this were the intention, the film, through Trevor's death, never allows for this restoration. In fact, the film unconsciously prevents the commingling of the male and younger child in the private sphere through its denouement.¹² Even though Trevor never realizes the fantasy of establishing a nuclear unit with his mother and the man he has come to idolize, the film nevertheless seems to grapple within an anxiety about the nature of the same-sex relationship. In a curious scene where an older man at a bus stop propositions Trevor as he attempts to run away, Eugene, in an uncharacteristic act of rage, beats the would-be molester upon discovering the two together. Although the violence occurs off-screen, in the men's room, we are led to believe that it was a vigorous one, as Eugene exits the restroom clutching his hand, as if he had over-exerted himself in punishing the pedophile. This strange sequence functions to reassure the viewer that the relationship between Eugene and Trevor is particularly devoid of erotic content. The incident exists in the narrative in order to shore up the lines between acceptable and unacceptable relations with children.

Stephen Spielberg's *AI: Artificial Intelligence* garnered modest critical praise and a large box office, particularly for Osment's moving performance in this futuristic retelling of the Pinocchio story. Based on a 1969 short story by Brian Aldiss entitled "Super Toys Last All Summer Long," *AI* posits a future where, because of massive flooding creating less habitable space and overpopulation, reproduction is now closely monitored, and to counter the problem of childlessness, robots are created to fill the role of a child. Osment plays David, the first child robot who can be programmed not only to think and experience emotions, but to love his mother. The film makes the distinction

between “natural” humans, called “Orgas,” and artificial beings, called “Mechas” and dramatizes the tensions between these two species. Spielberg in typical fashion explores the ethical underpinnings of a society that is cleaved by this social distinction, generating great pathos for the Mechanical beings, themselves second-class citizens. David is called on to focus this social problem. Upon his creation, he is given to a couple who recently lost their natural son to an illness. In this futuristic world, humans can be cryogenically frozen and then reawakened if a cure or treatment is found for them. Thus, their real son Martin is not dead, but merely “pending.” To assuage their grief, husband Henry (Sam Robards) brings David home to an initially dissatisfied and repulsed wife Monica (Frances O’ Connor). The couple becomes used to the curious Mecha, and eventually Monica decides to program David to love her, which is done through the recitation of seven sequential words. This imprinting of maternal love is eternal and irreversible. Thus, David begins to experience love for his mother just as Martin emerges from his pending state and returns to reclaim his place in the household. A manipulative and jealous boy, Martin is able to convince his parents that David is destructive and unsuitable for the family. Monica, realizing David will be destroyed at the place of his manufacture if they return him, leaves him in the middle of a forest to fend for himself, explaining that she can never see him again. Crushed by the turn of events, David experiences the rejection of his family and the loss of his mother as acutely as he has experienced love. For the rest of the film, David, following the cue of the Pinocchio story, seeks out the Blue Fairy to become a “real boy” and win back his mother’s love. At the film’s end, after being frozen for 2000 years, he encounters a new race on Earth

who read his past history and grant him one single day to be with his mother Monica based on what they can construct of her from DNA.

AI clearly has resonance for its queer audiences. Cynthia Fuchs writes in her review, “‘I’m Sorry I Didn’t Tell You About the World!’” that David’s quest to be a “real” boy has vast metaphoric possibilities: “Here, as in most science fiction, ‘real’ is code for something else, actually a lot of something else—like flesh-and-blood, sentient, emotional, whole, worthy, valuable, endowed with civil rights—in a word, human.”¹³ Fuchs here omits a rather crucial and looming “something else”—heterosexual. The examination of the Mecha vs. Orga society is a potent allegory for the social construction of authenticity and realness. The film’s tag-line is as follows: “David is an eleven year old. He weighs sixty pounds. He is four feet, six inches tall. He has brown hair. His love is real. But he is not.” This description encapsulates the experience of many queer youth who feel outside the family structure due to their difference or inadequacy. Heterosexuality, of course, is coded as natural, as normal, organic, whereas any deviation from heterosexual is coded as artificial, inauthentic, inhuman. David’s expulsion from the nuclear family, occasioned by the return and the dominance of the “natural” son causes him to perceive his difference from the “Orgas” as that which renders him insufficient, unlovable. He clings to the fantasy of the Blue Fairy as an answer to his difference.

Just as in the two previous films I have discussed, Osment’s character befriends an older man who is outside the nuclear family and forms a close attachment to him. In this film, this relationship is with fellow Mecha Gigolo Joe (Jude Law).¹⁴ Interestingly,

Joe is a love Mecha, one constructed for women's pleasure. Yet, many critics and lay viewers have noted the heavily gay coding surrounding his character. Joe is something of a dandy--heavily made-up, with puffy hair and an undeniable flamboyance. What is more, his romantic scenes with Orga women foreground the artifice and performativity surrounding heterosexual courtship; for instance, to set the mood, Joe radiates old romantic music from his finger. Together, he and David traverse the landscape in search of the Blue Fairy. They support one another and insist on each other's realness. The queer fantasy inherent in this relationship is that of support from an older person, who mirrors and validates the identity of the younger, imparting survivor skills and the embracing of self. The final recognition by David of his mother's very real love for him, and his for her, generates enormous queer pleasure too, as it suggests that realness is an unstable category and that acceptance and love are not predicated on a distinction between Orga/Mecha (Gay/Straight).

Taken together, these three Osment films provide an expansive array of the typologies of filmic children addressed in the previous chapter. As demonstrated in the above readings of his films, it becomes clear that his personae inhabit the realms of the Freak, the Phantom, and the Golden Child, at the very least. The socially abject dimensions of his characters allow the queer spectator in particular a space for experiencing a familiar social liminality and possibly melancholic identification. Yet, these cinematic narratives also afford a narcissistically affirming connection to the queer child as fantastically a Golden Child. The narratives of Osment's queer child—whether in the context of horror, melodrama, or fantasy—function perhaps more as an

Hitchcockian MacGuffin, as they enable the fantasy of the uncanny child to maneuver its way from a sort of ontological homelessness or displacement to a more transcendent and aestheticized subject of pathos generated by its own misrecognition as insufficient or wrong. The principle works of Osment dramatize a child who, though initially coded as out-of-place and out-of-time, progresses from social abjection to human importance.

In what follows, I explore a more reception-based approach to Osment's characterizations. In looking at various audience formations—both queer and hetero-centric—and their responses to the films discussed above, as well as the celebrity status of Osment himself, I address further how different relations to the child avatars reveal the workings of both queer positivity and cultural homophobia.

Queer Recognition, Uncanny Suspicion: The On-Line Reception of Haley Joel Osment

Internet response to child star Haley Joel Osment and his films indicates audiences' deep-seated and vexed engagement with both ideas of queerness and various strains of giftedness. In this section, I will first look at instances of reception where Osment is characterized as "the gifted child" and then look further into more sexually specific designations of his characters and star persona that have evolved from public responses to him.

In ferreting out the significance of the responses to Osment's image and persona, it is crucial to look beyond merely explicit audience designations of Osment's queerness. Rather, some of the more noteworthy observations to be gleaned from his reception involve the ways that audiences reference his "giftedness," both as an actor interpreting

characters and as the characters themselves. It is important to note that on-line audiences refer to Osment and his characters at different moments and often do not make distinctions between their perceptions of him and his characters. Rather, those describing watching Osment in his films move rather seamlessly from assessments about the actor to observations about the character without often acknowledging the significance of the distinction. Here, terms like *precocious*, *eerie*, *uncanny*, and *creepy* become salient appellations that reveal an oblique relation to the sensing of queerness within Osment's work. I would argue that these oblique characterizations reveal the difficult-to-articulate threshold upon which knowingness in children becomes understood as erotic knowingness.

Among the film reviews, message boards, and web logs on the Internet as of March 2003 are over 200 references to Haley Joel Osment as "precocious."¹⁵ In two instances, he is characterized as an "unnaturally precocious kid in a culture where kids act too old" and a "precocious junior sufferer who sees into the hearts of suffering adults."¹⁶ More than 180 contributors call Osment eerie, referring to his "eerie believability" or his "eerie, otherworldly presence."¹⁷ Over thirty descriptions exist of Osment or his performances as "uncanny."¹⁸ Over 900 writers refer to Osment as creepy: He is "at once childishly innocent and disturbingly creepy",¹⁹ "[H]e may have talent, but I think he's creepy"; he "seems more creepy than cute"; "it's even creepier when a boy looks and behaves like Haley Joel Osment"; he is "very convincing and very creepy"; "Haley Joel Osment is creepy good. Maybe he doesn't really see ghosts, but

maybe he cut a deal with the devil for this performance”; he “seems destined to play the alienated, slightly creepy kid.”²⁰

It may seem par for the course that words such as “creepy” and “eerie” be attributed to Osment, given his performance in the supernatural thriller *The Sixth Sense* and even his role as a human facsimile in *AI*. However, mentions of his creepiness appear in contexts outside discussion of these films. Even in references to the melodrama, *Pay It Forward*, similar terms crop up regularly. Moreover, Osment as a child star outside of his roles is discussed in the same terms. Regularly, he is characterized as an “unnatural robot child” or a “spooky pseudo-child.”²¹ Clearly, these roles have permeated his star image in the cultural imagination.²²

Beyond these adjectival attributes so zealously clustered around Osment’s screen personae lie other, more subtle speculations about the disconcerting power of his presence as it registers a suspect knowingness. In a *Salon* article on *AI* entitled *Boy Wonder*, Stephanie Zacharek poses the question in her by-line, “How does Haley Joel Osment understand the movie better than its director does?” While she criticizes director Spielberg’s tendency to veer in the direction of soft sentimentality, she credits Osment with the film’s true strength—its ability to “bravely probe the darker side of the love of children.”²³ Of Osment, she claims, “He’s a clear barometer of thoughts and feelings that Spielberg sometimes winds around too vaguely and obliquely, almost as if he’s afraid to face them too directly.” It is interesting to note that Zacharek never tries to identify the thoughts and feelings she believes Spielberg eclipsed in his direction; instead, she raises this precocity within Osment only to write it off as an ageless aspect of thespianism. She

concludes, “In the context of *AI*, Osment is an actor first and a kid second. His performance is both a significant contribution to the mythology of child actors, and a testament to the mystical inexplicability, the sheer weirdness, of great acting among actors of any age.”²⁴ If Zacharek begins her piece with an inquisitiveness indicative of those made uncomfortable by Osment’s precocity, she ends with a slightly evasive claim for talent’s timelessness.

While I want to resist any sweeping assertion that these descriptions of Osment as precocious, eerie, creepy, or uncanny are barely veiled expressions of his perceived queerness, I do want to insist on the semiotic overlap between these ostensibly asexual terms and the more erotically oriented senses of knowingness. The discomfort with the child who “knows too much,” registered in so many of the above references to Osment’s oddness, seems firmly rooted in the social need to sequester the perceived innocence of childhood from the space of sexual knowledge.

Eve Sedgwick, in her confessional book *A Dialogue on Love*, recounts her own childhood as one marked both by precocity and queerness. In fact, she designates precocity itself as a queer state. In recollecting her early life, she muses that her sense of knowingness frequently found itself at odds with the expectations of her parents, who expected her to be more like a “normal” girl: “I’m thinking how much the spookiness of that kid must have dwelt in the mix of fierce verbal aptitude with the already raging depression. Almost-constant efforts to deprecate or blunt the force of both of those must have made her all the creepier... That [my mother] could tune in on them I’m certain.”²⁵ Describing her experience as a child in her family as “like being an adult in bad drag as a

child, and being a child in bad drag as an adult,” she articulates the predicament of a child who is attuned to the disparity between the codes of behavior that govern what normal children think and feel and the need to acknowledge an interior life that transgresses that projected space of innocence. As such, her attempts to perform a childhood that was not resonant with her experience result in having no “mode of being that didn’t feel entirely spoiled by all the falseness.”²⁶

Sedgwick’s characterization of the gifted child as one immured in a performance of falseness or inauthenticity is sure to resonate with queer spectators of Osment’s work. In this vein, the encounter with the Freak avatar may be one of shameful recognition and empathy. Yet, these films offer forms of narrative fantasy that center the marginalized Freak. That is to say, the social codes and conditions that position the child as abject break up or become incoherent in the narrative; they give way to other fantastic ways of relating to the diegetic world. Ghostly (queer) presences become real, material and important through the dreamscape of these films. The very child who is outcast for “seeing dead people” becomes gifted in a transcendent sense through the recognition of his powers to heal, bridge, stretch relationality into more elastic and expansive forms. The Freak, in a sense, gets recast as Golden Child through a re-imagining of its identity as important and crucial to human relations.

The ensconcement of Haley Joel Osment and his work in an explicitly gay vernacular is readily evident both on-line and in popular culture. On the popular gay-themed sitcom *Will & Grace*, the character Jack is given to punctuating statements, using predominantly queer icons to express surprise or dismay.²⁷ In one episode, Jack, a gay

paternal donor who has recently reunited with his biological son Elliot, picks out an ostentatious back-to-school wardrobe for him and upon seeing him in the clothes, remarks, “Haley-Joel-Osment, you look fantastic!” In another, Jack quips, referencing Mimi Leder’s film, that a do-gooder must have felt the need to “Gay it Forward.”

The catch-phrase “I see dead people” of *The Sixth Sense* has perhaps experienced the most gay appropriation on the internet. The marketing of shirts, mugs, sports caps, lunch boxes, and posters that read “I See Gay People” appears on dozens of gay and lesbian web sites. On a web site entitled “Pride In Art,” the merchandise depicts a pair of eyes peeking out from under sheets, much like Osment’s in the film, with the slogan at its foot. In another irreverent appropriation of the phrase, columnist Michael Musto of *The Village Voice* quips that Osment, in taking on the film *Pay It Forward*, has moved from “I see dead people” to “I see gay people” because of his co-stars in the film, Helen Hunt and Kevin Spacey, both of whom have long been rumored to be gay.²⁸

Several plays and scripts have emerged that parody the film by demonstrating its easily available gay allegory. A group called the Garrens Comedy Troupe performed a spoof in December of 1999 called “The Seventh Sense,” replicating nearly verbatim Cole and Malcolm’s bedside revelation:

Cole: I see gay people.

Malcolm: You mean on TV, or in the movies?

Cole: No, walking around. Sometimes they don’t know they’re gay.

The sketch, which was the main feature of their performance, concludes with psychiatrist Malcolm’s revelation that he himself is gay and has been in denial, just as Cole has

presaged. Malcolm comes to this self-discovery by noticing that he is wearing matching belt and shoes, with an Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt. In commenting on the genesis of this performance piece, Eric Snyder reveals that his learning of the term “gaydar,” the ability to read people’s homosexuality, inspired his script. He recalls, “The idea of being able to pick a gay man out of a crowd reminded me of Cole’s unique ability in *The Sixth Sense*.”²⁹ Another similar, now-defunct website (Whatever-dude.com) featured a similar parody, ending instead with a scene where Cole and Malcolm end up having sex.³⁰

Other on-line sites provide insight into more resonant, passionate investments that viewers have in Osment and his films. In a web page entitled “The Seventh Sense: I See Gay People,” lesbian radio broadcaster and essayist Kim Ficera uses *The Sixth Sense* to discuss the importance of cultivating “gaydar” as a means of warding off the alienation of growing up gay.³¹ She writes,

Many people would agree that being gay is most difficult when we’re young and uninformed. As kids, we know that certain aspects of our lives suck, but we don’t know why. We have no idea what “gay” is, but we know that we’re “different”....Gaydar might be a queer rite of passage, a tool of survival that we’ve developed because our parents certainly didn’t have the balls or knowledge to tell us the truth....But isn’t it possible that their ignorance and our perseverance are what created the mental underground railroad called gaydar?³²

Ficera here recalls childhood as a space where vocabularies of desire were unavailable to her, where inarticulate feelings of “difference” marked her existence. The “tool of survival” she cultivates then, whereby she may glimpse the likeness of her desire in others, becomes a way of transforming her early perception of her difference to a knowingness that has a sexual specificity and an interpersonal value. The allegorical

appeal here of Osment's Cole, whose precocious recognition of the socially invisible becomes a gift rather than a curse, is undeniable.

Another columnist grounds her address to lesbians who are in the process of coming out in a similar reference to *The Sixth Sense*. Relying on similar tropes of

recognition and knowledge, she writes,

Believe me when I say that other lesbians will know you are one as well. They probably knew it before you did. You will recognize them too. Just wait and see. You will grow some sort of a sixth sense for it. You'll be laying [sic] in your bed under the covers, whispering, "I see gay people."³³

The writer's evocation of the scene in the film marks an identification with the child figure, paralleling Cole's situation of uncanny knowingness with proto-gay or lesbian child's nascent sexual awareness. Furthermore, her remark that "They probably knew it before you did," in echoing the condition of Malcolm's denial throughout the film, paints the film's relationship of Cole to Malcolm further in a gay light. The column bespeaks a pleasurable relation to this process of detection, as it secures a kind of intimacy through the establishment of a collective identity that is constantly building. Osment's line of confession becomes a potent political espousal of queer vision and visibility through its co-optation as a rhetorical tool that insists on a queer reality, even children's, within a social regime designed to guarantee and valorize heteronormativity.

Village Voice writer Eileen Myles demonstrates an even more intimate relation to an Osment text through her interpretation of *AI*. Her title *A.I., A Butch-Dyke Fantasy*, reveals the profound level of commitment she has to reading Osment's film through a queer lens. Following her modified tag line of the film, "Our love is real, but we are

not,” Myles queries, “Is it necessary to explain that one of the quiet facts of lesbian life is that many of us prayed to be ‘real boys’ in early childhood, or else were so often taken to be boys that things would have been easier if we actually were?” Echoing other critics who opine, “The entire film can easily be read as a parable about growing up gay,” she proclaims a trans-gendered identification with Osment’s child-hero.³⁴ Myles’ entry point of identification in the film lies in the mother-artificial son relationship. She offers, “The pact between Monica and David, the temporal-universal female and the immortal-artificial boy, is the inappropriate love at the heart of *A.I.*, a love that’s about the mystery of dovetailing time in a world constructed by ‘real men.’” The focalized romance between mother and “son,” then, opens up multiple spaces for queer readings. Not only does the idea of authenticity resonate with gay male readings of the text, but it also engages with the sense of the inauthentic produced by female transgender identity’s illegibility in the space of the nuclear family.

Osment and the Significance of Queer Knowledge

To be certain, Haley Joel Osment is not the first child actor to portray a knowing child. Cinema history is replete with representations of children who know too much. The 1956 film *The Bad Seed* features Patty McCormack as a murderous young girl, outwardly sweet, but sinister and monstrous. *The Exorcist*’s Linda Blair of 1973, *Poltergeist*’s Heather O’ Rourke in 1982, Drew Barrymore in 1984’s *Firestarter*, Macauley Culkin in 1993’s *The Good Son*, and countless other actors have portrayed children with illicit, dangerous, or deadly knowledge. Most often, the knowledge of these children is biblical in nature.³⁵ It is their connection to demonic presences that

gives them access to knowledge. In the case of *The Exorcist*, this knowledge is of an explicitly sexualized nature. Ellis Hanson writes at length of the controversy caused by the masturbatory scene in the film where the possessed Linda Blair shocks the audience through a frenzied orgasmic display.³⁶ Yet, these knowing children have all been narrated and displayed through the conventions of spectacle and horror. Operating within this genre, they do not garner pathos, relying as they do on the relegation of these children to the forces of evil and the requirement that they be destroyed to achieve narrative closure.

Osment's films work within different generic and affective modes. Although he is present in the context of the horror film in *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan refuses to depict him as monstrous or evil; he characterizes Cole as having knowledge about evil and death that is inappropriate for a child, yet focuses on the pathos of the child's burden of this knowledge. Likewise, in *Pay It Forward* and *A.I.*, Osment's characters occupy an outsider status, and operate under constant knowledge of that status and its social and psychic repercussions. However, these films still ask the audience to see the characters as "human," worthy of survival and stability, despite their building of an environment that is hostile to them and the knowledge they harbor. I would argue that it is this ethos of demanding acceptance through difference that makes the portrayals more difficult for hetero-normative audiences to consume and interpret. Not a fully "normal" child, nor a monstrous other, Osment's odd child presents a quandary for the spectator who is not prepared to embrace a child's capacity for knowledge, but cannot relegate the child suffering from knowledge to total abjection.

Indeed, Osment's films narrate him as socially deviant and displaced, but aestheticize him as a privileged entry point of identification. In all of his films, Osment is very well-lit; particularly in *The Sixth Sense* and *A. I.*, he glows in contrast to other characters and objects near him. Of his character in *A. I.*, critic John Demetry writes, "[David] becomes the most intimately explored figure and countenance since Maria Falconetti in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*."³⁷ He cites the cinematographer Janusz Kaminski's remarks on projecting this radiance within Osment: "For me, it all comes down to the light on a human face; that's where the mystery starts."³⁸ The angelic, almost Victorian iconography achieved through the feminizing gauzy close-ups that typify Osment's filmic presence generates an interesting tension between the knowingness of character and the appearance of a transcendent purity.

The proliferation of talk about Osment and his characters as creepy, eerie, precocious makes a case for the hetero-normative anxiety about the child with improper knowledge. The consignment of the gifted child to the avatar of the abject Freak seems to indicate the concerns of the spectator who cannot reconcile these portrayals with a narrative of normal childhood innocence. Yet, eeriness and precocity take on different valences for the queer spectator in these films and enable a fantasy of benign or even valued difference.

In proposing this reading of Osment's work, I am trying to open up a discussion of the various ways children may signify in the construction of visual and narrative pleasure. One may be tempted to say that Osment's function lies not in any sort of pleasure but merely in identification. This distinction would be the typical tendency to

isolate children discursively from discourses of desire or eroticism. I am inclined to concur with Jackie Stacey, who in her book *Star-Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, asserts that desire and identification should not be seen as dichotomous or altogether separate. Our processes of spectatorship are much more complex than a simple question of “wanting to have” vs. “wanting to be/become.” I would suggest that desire and identification intersect with one another in differing amounts and intensities when we watch any cinematic image, but particularly when children enter the picture. We are intensely invested in children, because, as James Kincaid puts it in his book *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child in Victorian Culture*, “The child is that which we are not but almost are, that which we yearn for so fiercely we almost resent it, that which we thought we saw in the mirror and almost wanted to possess yet feared we might. The child is the embodiment of desire and also its negation.”

The gifted child, then, should be seen as a productive and rich site of fantasy. In the case of queer audiences, in particular, for whom often childhood was harder than it was for others, the vast possibilities of desire and identification in the image of the child need to be explored in greater depth. The reception of Haley Joel Osment is intriguing in the ways it manifests both queer pleasure and hetero-normative discomfort about knowing children. The way that Osment is acknowledged as a vehicle for queer and gifted identities is a strong indication that phobic projections about childhood innocence are so ideologically entrenched that these acts of “over-reading” depicted in this reception study are necessary acts for the queer viewer to connect to a childhood sense of self. The

semiotics of giftedness, then, affords a restorative hermeneutic practice that mitigates against the invisibility or erasure of queer childhood. It is this practice that bespeaks an ardent identification with and a covetous desire for the child who is allowed to know what he sees and to see what she knows.

¹ Bruhm, Steven and Natasha Hurley. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, xxxiv.

² Alice Miller was an enormous influence on John Bradshaw, a popular writer who traded heavily in the Inner Child cottage industry.

³ Miller, Alice. *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The search for the True Self*.

⁴ Tompkins, Jane. "Me and My Shadow." *Feminisms*. Eds. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. 1995.

⁵ See Elaine Showalter's *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (1997) and Judith Levine's *Harmful to Minors* (2000).

⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

⁷ Reviews in *Washington Post Book World*, *Vogue*, *Newsweek*, and numerous other publications have deemed it required reading for therapists and useful for people of all backgrounds.

⁸ The diegetic cosmology is never fully explained in the film, though there are Catholic undertones to the plot involving the unresolved Dead. The film only reveals that Cole has access to the Dead who are still roaming the Earth, unbeknownst to the living.

⁹ Cole and his mother, and Cole and Malcolm are the two main dyads of the film, from a narrative standpoint and as the film's central affective energy.

¹⁰ This potential identification, of course, is not limited to the GLBTQ viewer, but rather, anyone who felt misplaced or misunderstood as a child. The emphasis on the queer subject here is intended to mark the primacy of sexual difference as a determining factor in the childhood experience of otherness.

¹¹ *Pay It Forward* was shot on the heels of the 1999 Columbine High School shootings and thus, in the midst of wide-scale media attention to school violence, particularly violence towards those perceived to be gay.

¹² I would like to thank Janet Staiger for her suggestion that the film's narrative trajectory forecloses the problematic "coupling" of Trevor and Eugene.

¹³ www.popmatters.com/film/reviews/a/a-i2.html

¹⁴ Jude Law, critic Cynthia Fuchs notes, brings a host of queer signifiers to the role. His participation in gay-themed films such as *Wilde*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, and *Bent* adds an intertextual richness to his performance of the dandy.

¹⁵ Jim Slotek, www.canoe.ca/JamMovies, accessed March 10, 2004.

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- ¹⁶ www.newyorkmetro.com/newyorkmetro/movies/reviews/3964, 3/10/2004.
- ¹⁷ www.geocities.com/haleyjoelosmentfans/bio, 3/11/2004.
- ¹⁸ www.kidactors.com/haleyjoelosment, 3/8/2004.
- ¹⁹ See www.filmthreat.com/features, 3/8/2004.
- ²⁰ www.viewlondon.co.uk/review-722.html, rateitall.com/I-46089-haley-joel-osment.aspx, citypages.com/filmreviews/detail, earlygirl.com/ai, 3/15/2004. www.ravecentral.com/sixthsense/review, www.greencine.com/list?action, www.snowstone.com/cat-movie.html, 3/15/2004.
- ²¹ www.angst-identprone.org/archives/000293.html, www.troma.com/lk2/ai, 3/12/2004.
- ²² Kevin Spacey even referred to Osment as a “forty year old midget” while shooting *Pay It Forward*.
- ²³ Zacharek, Stephanie. *Boy Wonder*.
- ²⁴ *ibid.*
- ²⁵ Sedgwick, Eve. *A Dialogue on Love*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, p. 30.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ²⁷ Other examples of Jack’s outbursts include the names Sarah Jessica Parker, the actress from *Sex and the City*, lesbian singer K. D. Lang, and Mary Louis Parker, an actress associated with a string of queer films.
- ²⁸ www.jedryan.com/articles/musicfest2002.html, 3/20/2004.
- ²⁹ www.ericdsnyder.com/view.php?lyrkey, 3/8/2004.
- ³⁰ The actual sexualization of Osment, his characters, or filmic narratives occurs very rarely online, aside from many inquiries on message boards about Osment’s sexual orientation and a handful of websites that depict him in gay erotic fan fiction (about five).
- ³¹ There are many other iterations of the “I see gay people” joke/slogan on the internet, one being journalist Michael Wilke’s use of the phrase to introduce his research on the presence of gay signifiers within television and web commercial advertisements.
- ³² www.kimficera.com/essays/seventhsense.html
- ³³ www.internettrash.com/users/mslickalot, 3/23/2004.
- ³⁴ www.q.co.za, 3/24/2004.
- ³⁵ *The Bad Seed* was remade for television in a 1985 version starring Christa Denton.
- ³⁶ Hanson, Ellis. “Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in *The Exorcist*”. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Eds. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- ³⁷ www.gaytoday.com/ai, 3/24/2004.
- ³⁸ *ibid.*

Chapter 3

Shaping Pedophilic Discourse: *American Beauty and Happiness*

The interrogation of suburbia's facades is hardly new fodder for Hollywood or independent cinema. The Academy Award-winning *Ordinary People* of 1981 was hailed as an incisive foray into middle-class malaise; it garnered praise as a subtly artful critique of family values and the importance of appearances and surfaces to the sustenance of bourgeois culture. Prior even to *Ordinary People*, movies such as *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969), *The Graduate* (1967), and the melodramas of Douglas Sirk pushed the envelope by subjecting suburban life to intense scrutiny, raising issues of social conformity, gender parity, the naturalness of monogamy, and the decay of the nuclear family. We can even trace cinema's probing of middle-class normalcy back to 1943 Santa Rosa, California, in Hitchcock's titillating family thriller *Shadow of a Doubt* and possibly back yet earlier.

The mid- to late nineties witnessed a number of films with similar aims of laying bare the pitfalls and hypocrisies of suburban life. These films have matched or surpassed their predecessors in terms of their ambitions to expose or redefine subject matter about children heretofore regarded as taboo in mainstream cinema. Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) explores preadolescent sexuality against the backdrop of the baby boomers' disenchantment with the enterprise of free love. Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) dramatizes the collusive powers of home, school, and media to degrade or destroy the body image and self-esteem of adolescent girls. Greg Mottola's *The*

Daytrippers (1996) chronicles a family outing that facilitates another sort of “outing”—the husband’s closeted homosexuality and its effect on the family’s children.

The frequent cinematic turn to the American suburb and the ever more jarring disclosures of pathology and deviance within it points to its status as a profound site of fascination and dread. Having grown out of a constellation of fears and anxieties over the integrity and safety of the family, primarily the white, upwardly mobile heterosexual nuclear family, the American suburb is an ideologically fraught space.

This chapter focuses on two recent critically successful films of suburban life, Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty* (1999) and Todd Solondz’s *Happiness* (1998) as two events that have facilitated public discourse about pedophilia within the family context and the moral and aesthetic implications of its representation in mainstream film. I examine the public reception of these two films vis-à-vis a popular Internet forum, the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).¹ In particular, the chapter addresses how the pedophilia, dramatized in both films, is spoken through this online medium. In doing so, I do not intend to affix any static or discrete meaning to the practices, situations, and affective modes that pedophilia as a category may come to signify.

Rather, I focus on what audiences choose to identify or discount as pedophilia and how gender, sexual object choice in terms of the child, and cinematic narrative strategies inform these choices. Additionally, I explore the category of homosexuality as a *structuring absence* in the films’ public discourse.² Starting from the assumption that any critical map of public reception requires an examination of the silences and fissures contained within the text-event’s emergent discourse, I contend that homosexuality’s

virtual absence in the body of popular discussion may point to an under-explored symptom of cultural homophobia. This homophobia, I argue, manifests itself in the popular conflation of same-sex desire with pedophilic desire that results from a hetero-normative refusal to acknowledge distinct differences among categories of sexual difference and to cluster everything different as monolithically abject.

American Beauty: The Story of Lolita or Lazarus?

I loved the idea behind this movie, an average middle-aged man has his rebirth and regains his youth.

A tired male fantasy [where] Spacey falls in sexual lust with a gorgeous high school blonde. Sooooo subversive!

-IMDb Users

Both *American Beauty* and *Happiness* have received an extraordinary amount of attention on the IMDb. By December of 1999, just three months after its national release, *American Beauty* ranked the number two movie of all time on the site, just below *The Godfather* and above *Schindler's List*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *Casablanca*.³ In those three months, 6,970 user votes were cast for the film. In that same time, 492 online reviewers posted user comments for the film, which is remarkable considering the average number of posts for the top 10 films was 140 per film.⁴ *Happiness* experienced a much more modest release in the Fall of 1998 and had but a fraction of *Beauty's* promotional costs. Yet it ranks an impressive number 177 of all time. In December

1999, fourteen months after its limited release, it had accrued 140 user comments—the same number as the average top 10 film. Interestingly, *Happiness* saw a resurgence in public comments after *Beauty*'s release, with over a third of the postings appearing post-September 1999, suggesting the public's conception of them as companion pieces.

American Beauty experienced enormous critical and box office success upon its release in September 1999. With a budget of only \$15 million, it had earned \$65.6 million in the United States by mid-November 1999. DreamWorks SGK marketed the film both to adults and teenagers (though the film garnered a “restricted” rating from the MPAA), and two different trailers aired on network television—one focusing on teens Thora Birch, Mena Suvari, and Wes Bentley, the other capitalizing on Academy Award nominees Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening. The film depicts the mid-life crisis of suburban patriarch Lester Burnham (Spacey) and its manifestations in his professional and personal life. Lester's “crisis” includes an obsessive fascination with his daughter's high school friend nymphet Angela (Suvari) and a simultaneous attempt to recapture his youth, his freedom from authority, and his sexual attractiveness. The film also focuses on wife Carolyn Burnham's (Bening) professional travails and her extramarital affair with a rival real estate agent. Added to this mélange is the budding relationship between the Burnhams' daughter Jane (Birch) and next-door neighbor Ricky Fitts (Bentley), a social outcast whose peculiar aesthetic vision has burgeoned despite or because of the repressive familial atmosphere generated by his homophobic father (Chris Cooper), himself a repressed homosexual, and his catatonic mother (Allison Janney).

Although a sexual relationship between Lester and Angela is never fully realized in the film, much of the film's *mise-en-scène* is devoted to his fantasy life anchored by the sexually assertive adolescent girl. The scene in which Lester first glimpses Angela segues into a dream sequence in which he and she alone are in the school gymnasium. The fantasy culminates in drill team-outfitted Angela's disrobing, whereupon rose petals emanate magically from her cheerleading uniform. It is not difficult to discern an element of the tongue-in-cheek, considering the clichéd status of the desirable school-girl-in-uniform and the stereotype of the middle-aged male crisis that can be "fixed" by a younger woman.⁵

While we are first introduced to the rose motif through Lester's watching his rigid wife menacingly clip and trim her roses in their front yard [the film's title itself most apparently referring to a classic type of rose], the petals emanating from Angela in contrast represent a pleasurable fragmentation. His wife's joyless clipping of the cultivated roses reads as castrating and sterile; Angela's dissemination of petals evokes in contrast a decadence and spontaneity. Other fantasy sequences around the female adolescent include a scenario of Angela in the Burnhams' bathtub, again adorned here discretely with rose petals, coyly beckoning Lester to join her, and later, Angela in the kitchen, kissing Lester passionately, at which point he plucks a rose petal from his mouth. Lester's actual attempted seduction of the girl near the film's end, is thwarted by the realization, despite her insistent posturing, that she is a virgin and therefore only "a child." This recognition gives way to a more paternal posturing, where he feeds and

covers her and uses the opportunity to inquire about the well-being of his daughter, whom he has largely neglected throughout his middle age and her pubescence.

While this relationship between Lester and Angela, so resonant of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, arguably constitutes the crux of the film's attraction, it has rarely been characterized in public discourse as a pedophilic one. In the broadest sense, pedophilia is defined as the "act or fantasy on the part of an adult in engaging in sexual activity with a child or children."⁶ The term as it circulates in American culture and legal discourse connotes a moral evil; in the public imaginary, it evokes the sense of a lack of children's knowledgeable consent, the power imbalance of intergenerational relationships, and the inherent sexual and moral corruption involved in their realization.

Several factors may account for the virtual omission of pedophilia as a central trope in public discussion surrounding *American Beauty*. First, despite Burnham's final realization of Angela's sexual inexperience, she consciously presents herself as a sexual object and, to some degree, a sexual predator throughout the film. Angela's dialogue is replete with ribald and aggressive assertions about her sexual prowess, her vast experience with men, and her explicit intentions for ensnaring Lester. Just as the film takes pains to objectify Angela and to fetishize her nubile youth, it also accentuates her own nymphet predilections to objectify men. As Angela flirts with the bumbling Lester, she comments on his physique and makes it clear that he meets with her approval physically. Thus, issues of sexual agency and consent can be more easily negotiated in the construction of Angela as an appropriate object choice for Lester or the viewer identifying with him. The film's final revelation, however, that Angela's sexual bravado

masks the fears and insecurities of an inexperienced girl signals an end to her objectification. Yet, the film does not invite any sort of retrospective contemplation of her appropriateness as an object of desire. The earlier eroticized images of her are relegated to a part of Lester's past fantasy-fueled dysfunction; Lester's erotic interest in her dissolves at the film's denouement, registering Angela as a desexualized child who is, finally, taking a backseat to the concerns of his biological child. In essence, the film displaces Angela's status as nymphet and recasts her as either phantom (a lost child whom love eludes) or freak (an outcast from the family).

A second factor that may account for the absence of discussion about pedophilia is Angela's sex and gender. Discourses of pedophilia often revolve around homosexuality, despite much social scientific evidence to the contrary.⁷ Often pedophilia and pederasty, a male's penetration of a boy, are conflated as concepts, and, therefore, pedophilia as a heterosexual practice is often illegible.⁸ Third, the character Angela is in her late high school years and is, therefore, close to or of the legal age of consent. Moreover, her bodily maturity may be a source of disavowal for the desiring viewer. The specularization of her body, combined with her "adult" knowingness, may tip the scales from her perception as a "woman-child" to identifying her as a woman.

But perhaps more precisely, her depiction as a *fantasy* alleviates the burdensome task of assigning Angela to a binary identity of woman/girl, or appropriate/inappropriate object. Similarly, pop star Britney Spears, after enduring the limelight for the first several years of her career amidst cacophonous public debate about her status as an exploited girl or self-assured woman, capitalized on this ambivalence in her Top 40 song,

“I’m Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman.” This seemingly liminal feminine identity, characterized by a compelling indeterminacy and flux, works to legitimate the viewer’s pleasure in the fantasy image by marking itself as outside both juvenile vulnerability *and* full sexual maturity and responsibility. The idea of the empowered fantasy object then, however compromised by its capitalizing on iconography of the school-girl or baby-doll, mitigates or deflects the charge of exploitative gazing. Like Spears’s performances of indeterminate maturity, the presentation of Angela capitalizes on the same sort of oscillation between woman and girl.

One more facet of the film that may exempt viewers from identifying the film’s content as pedophilic is the narrative’s ultimate denial of the sexual relationship to come to full fruition.⁹ Angela’s “deflowering” never takes place. Thus she may remain an object of erotic fantasy (for the spectator, if not for Lester), but her filmic body remains untouched or, at least, un-penetrated. Thus, even though Lester’s seduction fantasy is littered with the fragmented rose petals, Angela in reality remains “unclipped,” pristine. These explanations taken together—Angela’s sex, liminally mature femininity, and the narrative choice to preserve her virginity—seem to point to a general need for the viewer to see his/her object choice—insofar as s/he is aligned with Lester and his specular desire—as acceptable, natural, free of pathological meaning.¹⁰ These nuances in Angela’s characterization divert the possibilities of reading her as an inappropriate object choice.

The IMDb discourse surrounding the dynamics between Lester and Angela suggests several ways for hetero-normative spectators to work through their potentially

problematic fantasy. One of the most prominent ways of dealing with the dyad was to foreground its narrative importance as a catalyst in transforming Lester from a complacent cuckold to an exuberant aficionado of living for the moment. Over a third of the commentators framed Lester's attraction to Angela as one that enables his metamorphosis:

American Beauty is the story of Lester's reincarnation. Once he lays eyes on the love of his dreams,...he instantly wakes up to the world around him.

Lester's obsession becomes the catalyst for a life-wide make-over.

The film's narrative offshoots revolve around Kevin Spacey's transitional quest to wrest joy and meaning from the vacancy of his life through an obsessive preoccupation with his daughter's alluring cheerleader friend, Angela.... One quickly recognizes the misplaced dreams and ideals in Lester Burnham's sleepwalk through a manicured life alongside his controlling and abusively compulsive wife.

Spacey's character falls head over heels for a beautiful Barbie doll on his daughter's cheerleading squad.... It's terribly uplifting and somehow freeing to watch him liberate himself from a job he hates, a life he's bored with, and a middle-aged body he's neglected.

The viewers deal with the relationship by incorporating it into a more over-arching narrative of Lester's self-development. Through an arguably misogynist lens, Lester's success rests in his ability to disentangle himself from his monstrous, soul-killing wife and to seek refuge in a life-affirming feminine vision that restores a desirable virility. In this vein, the fantasy desire for a teenage girl is not an end in itself but a means to

masculine self-actualization and attaining (with the help of neighbor son Ricky) a more highly cultivated aesthetic relationship to reality.

Other commentators of the film made implicit and even occasionally explicit intertextual references to the *Lolita* story, using it as an intertextual touchstone to explicate the comparative merits of the relationship between Lester and Angela. These viewers (about forty of them) generally adopted a tone of unapologetic investment in the progression of the coupling:

Fans of *Lolita* will immediately recognize the tortured agony of Kevin Spacey's character, drawn like a moth to a love that can never be....Kevin is inextricably drawn to Mena, yet no attempt is made to challenge the tired Western stereotype that adult men cannot love teenage girls. And the ending of the film suggests a punishment that does not fit in with the overall message of the movie.

[Lester] is tired of life until he meets his daughter's pretty Lolita-like girlfriend.

Kevin Spacey's character [is] a kind of tragic figure who breaks his bonds, then dies for his trouble....*American Beauty* adds humor, charm, sexy 18 year olds, and an intergenerational mind-meld that sucks you into the action.¹¹

The spectators rely on a time-honored literary text to validate their readings of intergenerational desire. And indeed, the film encourages this inter-textual connection to *Lolita* in giving Angela the last name Hayes (Lolita's was Haze) and naming the protagonist Lester Burnham, an anagram of "Humbert learns." The first respondent above goes so far as to critique the film for not taking a stronger and more positive stand on intergenerational eroticism. Using the rhetoric of the stereotype, the comment

positions itself as a liberal critique of the limitations imposed on heterosexual affective expression. The respondent further faults the film's narrative structure as one that ideologically excludes the possibilities of the protagonist's erotic fulfillment because of his murder. In fact, the commentator reads Lester's death not as the result of homophobia and situational misunderstanding, but as a punitive act for his heterosexual intergenerational desires, which are inappropriate within the film's parameters. In an interpretation counter to the causal chain that precipitates the dramatic outcome, this reading understands intergenerational desire, not homosexual desire or homophobic rage, to be the sin that the film must exorcise to attain closure.

Only two of the 492 critics used the word "pedophilia" in their reviews of *American Beauty*. Aside from one other mention of Lester's object choice as "jail-bait," no other account gives a name to the relationship that bespeaks outright legal or moral illicitness. Interestingly, the two explicit references to pedophilia are used to widely different ends in their respective contexts:

Was it just me that was disturbed by the Spacey love-a-child angle? Hmm...I'm not normally a prude, but this was maybe just a little too much for me. But then perhaps that was the point. I have no desire to see young girls/women getting deflowered/fantasized over. Smacks to me of a little pedophilia that is definitely *not* necessary. But then, films that don't provoke and push buttons are just fluff.¹²

And what's the deal with the shock and outrage that I've seen expressed over [Lester's] fantasies about his daughter's friend, the blonde cheerleader, Hey, that's the way men are wired up. A drop-dead gorgeous young girl summons up all sorts of emotions in an older man. Pedophilic emotions? (There, I said it.) Yes and no. On the one hand he'd love to be able to have sex with her. ("Making love" is not the sort of experience that she represents

to him.) But on the other hand, and waaay more importantly, that kind of girl represents “lost youth” more dramatically than any number of theatrical metaphors could. And that’s exactly what a mid-life crisis is all about, isn’t it? Failing powers: physical, sexual, and for Spacey and many of the men he represents—the loss of joy in life. She’s just the trigger, the splash of cold water that wakes him from his coma.

The first respondent clearly reads the film’s presentation of the relationship as complicit with the eroticization of social and sexual imbalance. The formulation, “X is disturbing, because X is pedophilia,” indicates a reliance on the naming of the social taboo as a self-evident indictment. Yet, the accusation is tempered with a strange qualifier—“a little,” suggesting the presence of degrees to which acts or representations can fall into the realm of the socially illicit. Another interesting feature of the critique is the juxtaposition of “young girls” and “women”—a binary that articulates her uncertainty as to whether Angela should be read as woman or child. This hesitation is perhaps a logical corollary to the qualification of “how much” pedophilia the film is eliciting or representing. The “young girls/women” comment makes clear that liminal feminine maturity troubles the assignation of pedophilia, yet it also reveals a desire to reify pedophilia as a legible and discretely located practice.

The second commentator echoes the previous one’s tendency to read Angela as instrumental to Lester’s awakening, and directly addresses the relationship as a social taboo. The self-congratulatory “There, I said it” posits male desire for young girls as a sort of elephant in the room of political correctness. The answer, “Yes and no,” to the question he poses about the film’s production of “pedophilic emotions”¹³ advances the notion that male intergenerational desire is natural, even useful for the male psyche, yet

repressed through its consignment to the social and moral connotations of deviance and criminality. This commenter furthers the argument by suggesting that, just as Angela functions textually as a symbol for rejuvenation and youthful desire, young girls' bodies function similarly in American culture as emblems—even totems—of youth and desire.

The most prominent feature of user responses to the film was the dismissal or incorporation of the film's controversial social issues, such as intergenerational desire and crises of masculinity, into a broader, vaguer discussion of the film's aesthetic vision. For many of the online users, the interpersonal relationships of the film take a backseat to its more totalizing sense of life's profound beauty. The shift from the social realm to the aesthetic appears in a majority of the reviews:

[Lester] is a corporate nobody who fantasizes about his daughter's Best friend...What seems to be a horrible ending is transformed into something wonderful and truly beautiful...American Beauty.

I went to see this never thinking that a man's mid-life crisis and sexual fixation on his daughter's friend would make for a particularly fulfilling experience...It was actually much more profound than that.

There are those who would portray Lester's transformation as depraved. (After all, its primary genesis is his lust for a teen cheerleader, and is fueled by marijuana use), but they would forget the final moments of the film, wherein he discovers peace by becoming so free with himself and others that he finally sees the family he had come to hate was the truly beautiful thing in his life.

Beauty can also be found in the recognition that there are some things That can't change, and must be let go. These concepts and more are conveyed through humor and serious drama...[T]he film does it superbly. It is truly a great American film.

In most of the commenters' responses, this shift from the social to the aesthetic serves to hierarchize the film's formal and thematic elements. The third reviewer cautions against "forget[ting] the final moments of the film." This admonition indicates that Lester's obsessive desire for Angela that propels much of the film is significant only insofar as it is what must be renounced in order for him to channel his passion into the appropriate outlet—his family and the ineffable beauty of life.

This prioritization of the ineffable, the spiritual, over the material presences in the film can be attributed to what, I offer, may be called "the plastic bag effect." One of the film's recurring visual signposts is the video recording of a plastic bag blowing in the wind.¹⁴ Ricky Fitts, the damaged and introspective neighboring son, has recorded this image and plays it back for Jane, Lester's daughter and Ricky's girlfriend. Both regard the recording with a sense of awe, while the extra-diegetic piano music swells with portent. Ricky's influence over Jane and Lester is predicated on his espousal of an aesthetic rooted in the valorization of the everyday, the spontaneous, and the appreciation of life's chaotic ebbs and flows. The plastic bag, so eloquently mobile and dictated by the whims of the wind, encapsulates his aesthetic.

Conceived as a sublime filmic object, the plastic bag is rhetorically positioned as above the political and the social. The pleasure in its apprehension lies in its diversion from social reality. Yet, other sublime filmic objects exist in front of several lenses in the film—the film's cameras, Ricky's video camera, and the characters' and spectators' eyes. Repeatedly, Jane's and Angela's bodies, in various stages of undress, are captured through these lenses. Lester's first encounter with Angela, at the pep rally, establishes

her as a filmic object. As the diegetic fantasy sequence builds, the other cheerleaders disappear from the gymnasium floor; Angela, who has been performing a meticulous cheer routine, is displayed in slow motion. Vaguely Oriental, atonal music plays in the background. Her eyes are sultry, directed at Lester, who is now (in his fantasy) shown to be alone in the gym, watching her from the bleachers, where spectators belong. He gazes at her, spellbound, almost stuporously. The camera captures her as she arches and shimmies, her hair flying wildly in the air, much like Ricky's beloved plastic bag. Later in the film, Ricky captures Jane on tape, once undressing at her bedroom window for his benefit, and again, as they interview each other. As Ricky films Jane's body, he remarks on her unself-conscious beauty, displaying the same kind of reverent awe with which he regards the plastic bag footage.

It may be an act of over-reading to insist on a strict parallelism among these filmed objects and to reduce them to the same status in the film's economy. After all, we are privy to Lester and Carolyn's bodies as well, though their images are less framed, less concentrated, not remarked upon by characters within the film. In a sense, they are inconsequential, because the film does not meditate on the consequences of their displayed bodies. Yet, these filmic objects all cohere around some of the film's major preoccupations. One of these is an ongoing pontification on the meaning of ordinariness. The plastic bag, an ordinary, quotidian object, takes on monumental meaning for Ricky as he frames it in his lens, shoots the scene, and deposits the tape among the hundreds to thousands of others he has produced. He frequently insists that beauty lies in the ordinary.

Throughout the film, Angela is preoccupied with being special, revealing that her biggest fear in life is being labeled ordinary. In the thwarted seduction scene at the film's climax, Angela confesses that her attempt to bed Lester has been a desperate ploy to prove that she is extraordinary. Angela's aesthetic is in conflict with Ricky's and the film's; she is unwilling to embrace the beautiful in the ordinary and ends up aligned with the frigid ambition of Carolyn. Because disciple Jane can accept the beauty in the ordinary and thus, in herself, she escapes the social disenfranchisement that characterizes Angela at the film's end.

Thus, the plastic bag effect--the relegation of filmed bodies that are socially complex, fraught, and vulnerable to vehicles of the film's ostensibly apolitical aesthetic philosophy--diminishes the viewer's self-consciousness about the appropriateness of gazing at the nymphet child in question. This effect produces a sort of schizophrenic response to the film: the admitted titillation of the taboo of witnessing a story of male intergenerational desire and a spectacle of teenage flesh, on the one hand; and on the other, a dismissal of the pedophilic dimensions of the film experience and a reassessment of the filmic object that evacuates the images of political import in the name of aestheticism. Angela, that is, functions as a nymphet fantasy throughout the film, until Lester revokes his desiring gaze ("You're just a child," he finally assesses.), at which point Angela registers as a Phantom child, pushed outside the world of the nuclear family. This schizophrenia seems a necessary hetero-normative pathology to divorce intergenerational male desire from more culturally inscribed notions of pedophilia.

Considering the amount of online criticism devoted to the heterosexual dimensions of *American Beauty*'s plot, it is perhaps surprising that very little mention is made of the rather substantial subplot concerning the Fitts family—a plot that has an enormous bearing on the film's outcome. The manifestation of homosexual desire and homophobic violence that finally shapes the film's climax and Lester's fate is all but completely effaced in the IMDb body of comments.¹⁵ Another significant narrative thread is Frank Fitts's misunderstanding of the secretive relationship between Lester and Ricky. What is, in fact, a relationship based on Ricky's dealing marijuana to Lester is mistaken by Fitts for a clandestine sexual relationship.

The colonel repeatedly attempts to spy on the two and ultimately believes he has caught them in a sex act. (In actuality, Fitts misjudges the goings-on based on the distance and the angle from which he is spying.) Yet, as he perceives the act, he responds both with a look of consternation, but also one of curiosity and longing. It is after this scene that Fitts comes to Lester, attempts to kiss him passionately, is rebuffed by Lester, and then kills him. The linkage of Fitts' "witnessing" of the sexual act with his son with the decision to seduce the man he perceives to be the son's lover suggests perhaps that the conquest of his son's lover is Fitts's most proximate erotic connection to Ricky.

Ten of the 492 submissions refer to the strict colonel, Ricky's father Frank, as homophobic, but none of these addresses the desires that his homophobia cloaks, despite the many clues in the film that point to his repressed homosexuality.¹⁶ Time and again throughout the film, we witness the colonel's lingering gazes at his son of what may be construed as longing. He watches Ricky primp before the mirror with a sense of awe.

His violent attacks on his son come across as barely veiled expressions of desire. When Fitts brutally beats his son, his scolding words all but transparently decry the pain of his own repressive regime: “You can’t just go around doing whatever you feel like. You can’t! There are rules in life. You need structure; you need discipline.” Early in the film, the Colonel, while driving Ricky to school, expresses concern when Ricky becomes defensive at an anti-gay remark. When Ricky disingenuously agrees to tow his father’s line on the evils of homosexuality, saying, “If you’ll permit me to speak freely, Sir, fags make me want to puke,” Fitts is simultaneously gratified at having his “opinion” mimicked back to him and taken aback by the gravity of the slur, in which we later find he is deeply implicated.

Only one posting of the 492 makes explicit mention of Fitts as a homosexual character. The comment reads, “Let’s take Colonel Fitts’s repressed homosexuality. His earlier comments about homosexuals, if taken at face value, totally belie his later actions. That is what makes his kiss with Kevin Spacey totally shocking.” The comment’s emphasis on the “shocking” nature of the kiss reveals the reviewer’s unwillingness to make any hard-and-fast connections between homophobic behavior and repressed homosexual desire. Only two other postings mention Fitts’s homosexuality, and they do so only obliquely. No posting delved into his potential bisexuality.

One commenter writes, “I was bothered by an extra twist that’s thrown in near the end. It was unnecessary and made one character a little too implausible.” The other adds, “The last switcheroo seemed tacked on and had no impact on the true themes of the movie.” Most likely, these vague descriptions refer to Fitts’s attempt to seduce Lester,

the failure of which leads to the murder. Even though the suggestion of Fitts's sexual desires has evolved throughout the film, both commentators find the climactic moment out of place. For them, the colonel's sexuality becomes "implausible" through its articulation; the revelation of it deviates from the "true" and "universal" themes at stake in the film.

Another relationship left almost completely unremarked on is the compelling, yet unlikely friendship between Lester and Ricky. Teenage Ricky becomes a mentor of sorts for the misguided and weary Lester. Professing something of a school-boy crush on Ricky, Lester proclaims, "You're my new hero, Ricky Fitts," when he learns of the boy's blatant disregard for familial and legal authority. Lester's metamorphosis is guided by his emulation of Ricky's rebelliousness. As much as Angela, Ricky is instrumental in awakening Lester's sense of youthful desire. Both teens inhabit Lester's *mise-en-scène* of desire: Angela as a figure that mirrors his virility and Ricky as the agent that models the rebellious masculinity Lester so hopes to possess.

Ricky occupies perhaps the most various and complicated avatar functions in the film. As a child with a past characterized by institutionalization, incarceration, and social ostracism, he functions as a Freak. Yet, it is this very disregard for convention that Lester seizes on as empowering and inspirational. For Lester, Ricky functions as a Golden Child who figures a proto-heroic masculinity that Lester hopes to recover. And further, the spectator aligned with Colonel Fitts' gaze at his son would be more inclined to read Ricky as an *Ephebe*.

I would suggest overall that homosexuality is a structuring absence in the body of *American Beauty* criticism on the IMDb. As indicated by the discursive choices made by the online respondents, the erasure of the explicitly homosexual subplot as a critical thematic presence is conducive to the sustenance of what audiences perceive as the film's aesthetic vision, which relies largely on a nostalgic encapsulation of the "beauty" of the heterosexual nuclear family.

Happiness: The Transparent Pedophile and the Invisible Homosexual

Todd Solondz's *Happiness* accrued much critical praise upon its release despite a disappointing showing at the box office. With a budget of \$3 million, it earned only \$2.76 million in its theatrical release. Part of its under-performance stemmed from the lack of an NC-17 rating. Solondz wanted to keep certain facets of his film intact that would have warranted an NC-17 rating. He also went through several distributors before settling on Good Machine Releases and Killer Films, which finally agreed to release his version without deletions.

Unlike *American Beauty* and its interpretive complexities that make the assignation pedophilia quite a vexed issue for hetero-normative spectators, Solondz's film deals unabashedly with adult-child sex and even goes so far as to incorporate it into its black comedy. The film follows the lives of three sisters from suburban New Jersey and the relationships they try to establish and maintain to ward off loneliness and despair. Ironically, the most "successful" of the sisters—the one with a plush suburban home and three healthy children—is married to a therapist and serial pedophile, Bill Maplewood

(Dylan Baker), who seduces his son's friends by drugging them (and his whole family) when they sleep over.

The comedy emanates from the interspersed *Father Knows Best*-inspired father-son chats that Bill has with his son and namesake Billy. The eleven-year-old boy's angst over not yet being able to orgasm and the length of his penis become focal points of their interactions. The film establishes a parody of the Golden Child in its depiction of Billy, a confused child who seeks his father's affection and approval, only to learn of his pathological relation to children's bodies. The film's final moment contains Billy's proud and cringe-worthy announcement to his extended family (minus his now-incarcerated father) that he has finally ejaculated. He has achieved what his father tenderly reassured would be imminent in his development.

While the user comments on *American Beauty* used the word "pedophilia" only twice in 492 reviews, more than 35 of the 140 reviews of *Happiness* mention pedophilia explicitly; an additional 50 mention perversion or molestation. The portrayal of adult-child eroticism differs from *American Beauty* in several important ways. First, the (multiple) victims are boys. Second, the boys are prepubescent or on the cusp of pubescence. The actors portraying the victims had not undergone a significant voice change and did not display other visible secondary sex characteristics, and Billy is characterized as sexually immature. Third, the relationships are consummated (off-screen) in the diegesis, with articulated physical consequences to the victims. Fourth, the sex is not consensual, and the victims are not conscious of the acts until a later date.

Finally, the perpetrator Bill views his sexual compulsions as pathological and verbally laments his inability to control them.

The ways in which IMDb commentators chose to deal with the overtly and uncomfortably presented adult-child encounters in the film are quite disparate and revelatory of the ways that moral panic often is translated into aesthetic judgments. Although the film ranks very highly in the IMDb's voting system, many of the comments posted about the film are staunchly condemning in tone. The following reviews are indicative of the content of roughly a quarter of the comments submitted:

This 'movie' has left a greasy spot on my brain where it had lain;
I now have hellish images of depravity stuck in my mind.

I'm sorry but a grown man talking to his kid about having sex
with a little boy is just not funny.

This movie is absolutely wrong. I could forgive the movie entirely,
if it were to omit the pedofile [sic] section...I think I am now worse
off after seeing this movie.

I don't see what is funny about pedophilic rape. Thankfully,
we are spared the actual viewing of the act.

I would compare this film to *Natural Born Killers*, except instead of
promoting "violence," it promotes child rape!

The characters lacked any conscience and morals, which overshadowed
the whole movie and left you with a feeling of numbness.

Solondz offers no solution...While the types of problems he shows
are becoming more common, they are individual and not
universal...*American Beauty* comes much closer to the portrait of
suburban life and does finally offer a solution to the unhappy. That movie
was, at least, an attempt to create a work of art. *Happiness*, if it is
remembered, will be remembered as the work of an unhappy
craftsman, not an artist.

The commentators' disgust with the disruption of the fantasy of the innocent child is channeled into moral outrage, discussions of visceral damage to the viewer, genre criticism, and a crisis or failure in aesthetic representation. Many reviewers are quick to point out that pedophilia is a violence that the comedic form cannot acceptably encompass.¹⁷ Others portray the film as literally inflicting psychic damage, suggesting that the mere representation of child sexual abuse is traumatizing to the spectator.

Still others equate representation of subject matter with its promotion. The last commentator quoted above attempts to discredit *Happiness* as a piece of art. First, the post defines art as that which provides a "solution to the unhappy." It cites *American Beauty* as a work that delivers such a solution, whatever that may be. Second, it tries to establish true art as having "universal" qualities as opposed to merely "individual" ones. In doing so, it locates adult-child eroticism as an "individual" issue—one that does not and cannot speak to the human condition. All of these interpretive frameworks ultimately appear as strategies of distancing from and disavowal of any identification with a fantasy of pedophilia. The anxiety of being complicit with pedophilic desire in participating in the fantasy the film stages (simply through being a spectator of it) can only be assuaged through this expression of distance or condemnation.

While many outspoken opponents of the film registered their complaints on the IMDb forum, many others praised the film both for its comedic strengths and its bravery in confronting the taboo of pedophilia and even creating a somewhat sympathetic and complex character in the perpetrator:

I loved the pedophile. I don't know why, but he really rang true for me. There are several difficult and conflicting situations [in the movie], like pedophilia and other sexual deviations.... One could ask if society provides channels to individuals to properly develop their sexuality?

Dylan Baker's portrayal of the pederast...makes us understand how he's losing control of his attraction to little boys in a miraculous way.

His treatment of pedophilia is sad, sensitive, and frightening, yet he even manages to draw some comedy from it.

Solondz's scalpel is sharp, and he never flinches in depicting the unseemly (and generally taboo) subjects of child rape and pedophilia, which feature significantly in the narrative.

My favorite characters were probably the pedophile and his eleven-year-old son. No transference there, but their problems weren't represented in a way that gave the audience any quick connections to their emotions....I laughed and cringed at the same time, and then afterwards, I just thought the whole thing was horrifically sad.

Those reviewing the film positively tended to focus on Solondz's success in accommodating such dark material in the genre of comedy. Further, they expressed admiration for putting a human face on a rarely represented perversion. Finally, they suggested the film's capacity for allowing the audience to empathize with the plight of the pedophile, though one respondent's qualifier, "No transference there," bespeaks a fear of being identified with him. Two atypical responses went so far as to admit a narrative identification with Bill:

It was almost touching watching him trying to get the innocent victim to eat/drink the sleeping-potion-laced food.

It's hard to admit but I was hoping the child molester, Bill Maplewood, wouldn't get caught. Just stop doing what he was doing. I sympathize with him rather than the "normal" people around him. Perhaps it is because Maplewood was able to find happiness when everyone else was beating up on each other.

In light of the many discussions of pedophilia that have surfaced in the IMDb forum around *Happiness*, it is again puzzling that the discussion of homosexuality is virtually nonexistent. Bill's conquest of young boys does not in and of itself require that he be read as homosexually identified. In fact, many same-sex pedophiles do not identify as homosexual and view same-sex pedophilic acts and heterosexuality as two different, but not necessarily contradictory, facets of their identity. Yet I want to remark on a scene in the film that warrants attention in its suggestion of Bill's orientation. Near the beginning of the film, Bill recounts a recurring dream to his own therapist in voice-over, while the dreamscape is represented visually. He dreams of taking an M-16 to a peaceful park, populated by happy couples and joggers, and opening fire. In the course of the dream, he manages to slay one half of a gay couple as they are walking along. At the dream's end, the surviving man sits weeping over his dead lover as Bill looks on impassively.

An aerial view of the massacre reveals that the surviving gay man and Bill are wearing identical plaid shirts. This detail conveys a doubling of Bill's identity. And yet the dream may represent an even further fragmenting of his identity. In reading the sequence through the complexity of fantasy theory, Bill's entry points of identification into the scenario may be multiple, mobile, and unstable. Bill may identify with himself in the dream as assassin, with the deceased gay man, with the grieving gay survivor, with

one of the surviving or gunned down heterosexuals, or even with the very act of shooting itself. While the dream may represent unfounded anxieties that his fondness for boys makes him gay, the narrative's suggestion of his need to construct and punish a homosexual double, coupled with his repeated resistance to sex with his wife, builds a case for his closeted homosexuality that has been unacknowledged by online reviewers.

The virtual absence of discussion of sexual orientation in the *Happiness* forum may be indicative of several things. First, the online critics perhaps understand Bill to be a pedophile, suppose that pedophiles are definitionally homosexual and therefore assume that mentioning his homosexuality would be tautological. Second, the reviewers may reason that his pedophilia indicates a sort of arrested development, making any discussion of his orientation toward "adult" sexual objects irrelevant. Interestingly, the notion of arrested development is deployed in various social scientific and scientific bodies of thought to explain or describe the presence of both homosexual subjects and perpetrators of pedophilia. In a similar vein, respondents may consider categories of social deviance such as "homosexual," "pedophile," or "pervert" interchangeable rather than overlapping, mutually determining, or distinctly separate.

Historically, homosexuality and pedophilia have been mapped onto a larger field of the perverse, whether through sexological genealogies or psychoanalytic paradigms of development or drives. The slippages among the uses of the terms homosexual, pedophile, and pervert in public discourse make obvious the inclination to conflate or collapse these identities or behaviors into a more monolithic configuration of the deviate,

with great consequences to gay politics (and for that matter, to intergenerational sex politics and other formations that evoke a coherent position of social deviance).

The various ways in which *American Beauty* and *Happiness* stage intergenerational desire and the ways that they have been received by audiences indicates the inadequacies of public and critical discourse to describe pedophilia in nuanced ways. In this chapter, I hope to have demonstrated the narrative complexities of these representations of intergenerational desire. Several avatars of juvenile desire—Nymphet/Ephebe, Freak, Phantom, Golden Child—emerge as descriptive of spectator positions in these films. Various machines of desire are at work in both relationships among the characters of these films and relationships between characters and spectator. Yet, within popular discussion, the category pedophilia remains both recalcitrantly reified and elusive to define beyond the “I know it when I see it” criterion.

¹ The IMDb has existed in various forms and under various names since 1990. It began as a Usenet bulletin/discussion board called *rec.arts.movies*.¹ Access to the board required a Unix shell account, which could be provided predominantly by universities and corporations. Thus, the forum predated the point-and-click capabilities of the “Web browser,” which would not surface until 1994. At its inception, the board provided a space for film buffs who had the technological resources to discuss current releases and old favorites, and to construct a knowledge base that would encompass most mainstream films, who acted in them, and who directed them.

The IMDb in its current manifestation is a commercialized, incorporated entity that still offers free browsing services but also relies on ad accesses monthly. While the overwhelming popularity of the IMDb no doubt is mostly due to its free and unlimited usage, part of its appeal is attributable to the ethos of its mission statement: “to provide useful and up to date movie information freely available online across as many platforms as possible.” The database both provides easy access to knowledge about films and their

stars and fosters an environment of recognizing online users as potential citizen-critics by providing an opportunity to address other users.¹

As the IMDb has developed, it has enhanced the possibilities for user feedback by installing a one-to-ten voting system, whereby users may rate the films they wish, and a “User Comments” feature, where users can post their critiques of any film catalogued at no cost. It is important to understand that this posting forum is not a message board with threads of conversations among users. Rather, it is a register of discretely posted critical pieces that are almost never in acknowledged dialogue with the others.¹ The “User Comments” forum serves several purposes for different posters. Some submit their critiques to convey their emotional responses to a film or to relate anecdotes related to their viewing experiences. Others adopt a more distanced tone and rely on conventional popular critical models for their valuations, programmatically discussing acting, plot, cinematography, genre conformity, and other familiar categories. Still other citizen-critics use the forum as an opportunity to discuss broader social issues that emerge from a viewing experience or to discuss the current state of film and other media in terms of the moral climate they reflect, prescribe, or attempt to challenge. *Advertisement and licensing via Amazon.com for its financial sustenance.* Presently, the site serves over 20 million

² I am indebted to Janet Staiger and her suggestion of looking for structuring absences as part of the case study process in historical reception studies.

³ The IMDb breaks down the rankings of the top 50 films of all time according to gender. *Beauty* ranked second of all time with both genders.

⁴ Clearly, part of *Beauty*'s unparalleled attention in the voting and comments sections is due to its relatively recent release, compared to films like *The Godfather*. Still, the critical mass of posting is remarkable apart from this qualification.

⁵ The image most resonantly contemporaneous to the film is the one promulgated by then-teen star Britney Spears in her Catholic School girl performance in the video for “Baby, One More Time.”

⁶ American Heritage Dictionary.

⁷ Groth, A. N., and H. J. Birnbaum. “Adult Sexual Orientation and Attraction to Underage Persons.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 7 (1978): 175-81; Jenny C., T. A. Roesler, and K. L. Poyer. “Are Children at Risk for sexual Abuse by Homosexuals?” *Pediatrics* 1 (1994): 41-44. Further documentation of empirical research into the debunked linkages between homosexual identity and pedophilic practice is surveyed in Barry Glassner's 1999 book *Culture of Fear* and Elaine Showalter's 1997 *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*.

⁸ One reviewer mistakenly used the term *pederasty* for pedophilia in her discussion of *Happiness*.

⁹ In the original script, Lester does indeed have sex with Angela, but director Mendes changed the outcome, feeling it might be too provocative.

¹⁰ This generalization may seem crude in light of so many emerging theories of spectatorship along the lines of gender; I am referring here both to the viewer who may be aligned with Lester in his specular desire for Angela and also to the viewer who is resistant to pedophilic taboo as an impediment to the narrative's progression.

¹¹ It is noteworthy that the respondent refers to the characters of Jane and Angela as “sexy 18 year olds,” even though their ages are never made explicit in the film. Lester, upon learning that Ricky is a classmate of Jane, assumes that he is sixteen, indicating that the girls are as well. This error is symptomatic of viewers' reluctance to identify the sexual object as an adolescent.

¹² The commentator in another passage straightforwardly condemns the film's use of teenage nudity. This seems to be less of a gray area for critique. While the pedophilia is a matter of reading, the nudity is a fact.

¹³ Here, I assume the commentator to be a man based on his use of “we” elsewhere in the entry to refer to men in general.

¹⁴ In his Oscar acceptance speech, writer Alan Ball admitted that seeing a paper bag floating in the wind while he was in the World Trade Center plaza inspired him to write the script.

¹⁵ The inclusion of a gay couple in the Burnham's neighborhood, who are perhaps the most irritatingly well-adjusted, yet one-dimensional of the cast of characters, barely receives mention by online reviewers.

¹⁶ In the original version of the script, it is revealed that Colonel Fitts had a gay lover who died in Vietnam.

¹⁷ Since the release of *Happiness*, several comedies that play on childhood sexual abuse have been quite successful, among them *South Park* and *Freddy Got Fingered*.

Chapter 4

Ambivalence, Anxiety, and the Spectacle of the Nymphet/Living Doll

With all the charms of a woman,
You've kept the secret of your youth.
You led me to believe you're old
Enough to give me love. And now
It hurts to know the truth.
Young girl, get out of my mind.
My love for you is way out of line.
Better run, girl.
You're much too young, girl.

--Gary Puckett and
The Union Gap, 1967



Men do not demand genuine beauty, even in the most modest doses; they are quite content with the mere appearance of beauty. That is to say, they show no talent whatever for differentiating between the artificial and the real. A film of face powder, skilfully applied, is as satisfying to them as an epidermis of damask.... In brief, they estimate women.

--H. L. Mencken, 1922

In her *Harmful to Minors*, Judith Levine glosses James Kincaid's tracing of the simultaneous nineteenth-century inventions of childhood innocence and the "new ideal of the sexually desirable object," claiming that these coinciding emergences have since produced a "wicked psychosocial problem." In the spirit and aims of Kincaid's analysis, she concludes the following:

We relish our erotic attraction to children, says Kincaid (witness the child beauty pageants in which JonBenet Ramsey was entered). But we also find that attraction abhorrent (witness the public shock and disgust at JonBenet's sexualization in those pageants). So we project that eroticized desire outward, creating a monster to hate, hunt down, and punish.¹

Levine's and, by extension, Kincaid's assumptions about the conflicting impulses inherent in the sexualized child's "to-be-looked-at-ness" are very much in keeping with the central arguments of this dissertation. Indeed, the conflicting signposts of objectification and moral panic are no more intensely illustrated than in the fraught figure of JonBenet Ramsey, the six-year-old daughter of an affluent family from Boulder, Colorado, who was found brutally murdered in the basement of her home in late December, 1996.

Ramsey, daughter of Patsy and Jon Bennett Ramsey, became a focal point in national media upon her disappearance on Christmas Eve of 1996. The discovery of her body became a news fixture for months and even years to come. In addition to the newsworthiness of a child's murder within a socialite family, Ramsey's high-profile and highly cinematic participation in the world of child beauty pageants propelled her to front-page status. Static images and video footage of Ramsey's performances in these

pageants, as well as domestic depictions of her as an “everyday” six-year-old, received as much, if not more television coverage than the escape sequences documented in the O. J. Simpson murder case two years earlier. Tabloid writings proliferated, speculating on possible scenarios for the murder, among them a foreign faction’s kidnapping-gone-awry, a sexual predator, and—most persistently—the involvement of one or more family members in Ramsey’s death.

The Ramsey murder case remains unsolved, and news coverage persists eight years later exploring the legal and criminal processes at work in apprehending her killer. Yet, far surpassing journalistic reportage of the murder case have been sensational accounts of Ramsey’s home life and pageant career. Profoundly jarring images of Ramsey’s catwalk existence have overshadowed many of the case’s minutiae, having become themselves the “story” about the girl. The six-year-old’s ability to appear womanly, maturely feminine in her many guises, whether made-up super-model, brazen cowgirl, or 1940s vixen, has been the unsettling focal point of public discourse and fascination about Ramsey. Often commented on are her womanly gestures, her seductive gait, her knowing smile, and her savvy in confidently connecting with spectators. While Ramsey never participated in big-screen productions, her image and persona quickly took on not only televisual, but cinematic proportions.

The untimely erotic femininity with which Ramsey came to be closely associated produced innumerable human interest news stories regarding the ethics of child pageantry and the psychic and social repercussions of inflicting a glamorized pre-pubescent on highly impressionable young girls. Concerns about pageant life as barely-disguised child

labor and as thinly-veiled opportunities for over-bearing mothers to orchestrate a narcissistic and vicarious show business career spawned topics for daily talk shows and op-ed columns nationwide. Conversely, Ramsey became a platform for pageant supporters, who argue for the beauty competitions as sources of empowerment for young girls, where they learn self-esteem through parading their femininity.

Academic and popular cultural critics have weighed in voluminously as well on the Ramsey spectacle. Criticism has taken many forms, among them the feminist critique of the objectification of young girls in mass media and the Marxist-inflected critique suggesting that the traffic in eroticized girlhood comes from an expanded market catering to the commodification of youth.² Cultural critics of childhood like Henry Giroux and Henry Jenkins have argued that the Ramsey incident becomes an important site of mobilizing political agendas using the trope of “childhood innocence under attack” as a vehicle for promoting conservative family values. Hosts of other critics have taken the Ramsey incident, alongside the controversial Calvin Klein ads of the early 90s and the cultural fascination with the infamously underage Olsen twins, as signs that “Lolita has been revived.”³

In this chapter, I survey the cultural and academic responses to the Ramsey case, but I focus primarily on the significance of the spectator’s encounter with the image of JonBenet Ramsey. Whereas chapter two explored the pleasures and anxieties produced by witnessing a child with an over-abundance or “unnatural” kind of knowledge and chapter three described the difficulties for a hetero-normative spectator in confronting or speaking the dynamics of intergenerational desire, this chapter foregrounds the profound

discomfort the spectator faces in having wrong or conflicting knowledge of the eroticized child image. That is, this chapter addresses the problem of being misled or misinformed, as it were, of the conditions and status of the visual encounter with the moving and static image of JonBenet Ramsey. It places the sociopolitical concerns emanating from the Ramsey case in a confrontation with what I am calling the *pedophilic gaze*. Gaylyn Studlar has employed the same phrase in her recent study on early screen legend Mary Pickford, and our usages both diverge and have great affinities, which I will explain later.

This case study offers a reading of the media spectacle of JonBenet Ramsey and the ambivalence produced by her simultaneous sexual objectification and embodiment of innocence endangered. It suggests that the anxiety generated by Ramsey's image can best be explained through the theoretical framework of drag and transvestism, which foregrounds the idea of femininity as performance and excess and calls into question the ability of the spectator to discern appropriate objects of desire. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the public discourse of the "death of innocence" so prevalent around discussions of Ramsey and her body and suggests that the exceedingly aggressive rhetoric of violation that has shaped her as a cultural object of memory is, in part, a symptom of the revulsion and disavowal that the encounter with the "child in drag" produces.

A brief consideration of the epigraphs that begin this chapter will help ground its central concerns. The first, an excerpt from the 1967 ballad "Young Girl," is representative of a significant subgenre of popular music coming out of the 50s through the 80s, and arguably today.⁴ This genre anticipates the themes of films like *American*

Beauty in that it stages a *mise-en-scène* of desire around the girl-child figure yet narrates the protagonist's "valiant" decision to distance himself from the object of his desire.

Thus, the desire, marked by unavailability due to age difference, remains intact, but so does the integrity of the pining lover. These songs contain certain consistent elements:

1. The unavailable (young female) love object and the ardent (older male) lover who must renounce his love out of social convention; e.g., "My love for you is way out of line."
2. A direct, often accusatory address to the loved one, indicating resentment and maybe even aggression; e.g., "Young girl, get out of my mind... You've kept the secret of your youth."
3. A focus on the girl's naiveté, innocence, or immaturity, as well as her duplicity; e.g., "Beneath your perfume and make-up, you're just a baby in disguise."

Songs performed by Donny Osmond, Bobby Vee, and Steve Lawrence replicate these conventions exactly with lyrics like "You're looking real good like a woman now. Your mind hasn't gotten the message somehow"; "I want you, girl, but your wide-eyed innocence has really messed up my mind"; "I love the little wiggle in your walk... But you're too young to know the score"; "So go away, little girl, before I beg you to stay."⁵

These songs and the conventions that structure them reveal the presence of an intense cultural pedophilia in America that has resisted being named as such. In Kincaid's formulation, "Our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing."⁶ The lyrical formulation of *attraction to, deception by, dissonance around, and renunciation of* the too-young girl, I argue, models the affective trajectory that the image of JonBenet Ramsey engineers with great intensity.

The ill-fated lover's "tragic" misreading of a girl's maturity is recognized and explained in the second epigraph, a quip from the misogynist humorist H. L. Mencken. His assertion that men "do not demand genuine beauty" and "show no talent whatever for differentiating between the artificial and the real" opens up a space for describing the queer reception of JonBenet's image. Here, I am preoccupied with Mencken's terse, but provocative phrase, "[Men] estimate women." Throughout my argument, it should become clear that I am not merely designating an exclusively heterosexual male spectatorship, but rather a broader description of looking that crosses gendered and sexually oriented positions. I am interested in discerning what is productive and queer about the proposition that men "estimate women."

Ramsey and the Violent Rhetoric of Innocence

As the pictures proliferated, we quickly saw that some of the tapes had been slowed down to portray a flirting expression or to accentuate JonBenet's movements and make them look seductive. Suggestive music -- not the music played at the pageant -- had also been added, and presto, something innocent became something ugly. Many of the still photos had been doctored with eye shadow, heavy lipstick and rouge. Our daughter's innocence had been lost.⁷

--from *The Death of Innocence*,
by John Bennett and Patsy Ramsey

Innocence is a lot like the air in your tires:
there's not a lot you can do with it but lose
it.

--from *Erotic Innocence*, by
James Kincaid⁸

The reiteration of innocence is perhaps one of the most salient features in coverage of the JonBenet Ramsey murder story, as well as of the human interest stories about her career as a miniature beauty queen. Certainly, the term innocence is to be expected to appear many times, particularly as the guilt or innocence of the Ramsey parents has been in question since the body's discovery. Just as much, and not very surprisingly, the word innocence has been deployed to remark on Ramsey's stolen life, her stolen youth, and her stolen youthful appearance. "Innocence Lost" appears in the subtitle of a true crime novel about the Ramsey case. The parents of Ramsey entitled their chronicle of the murder and its aftermath in a book entitled *The Death of Innocence* in an attempt to exculpate themselves from both the murder and the allegations that they exploited their child. Contrary to popular assessments that they "stole" their daughter's innocence by dressing her up a seductive woman, the Ramseys argue that the media which manipulated their daughter's image through re-contextualization and photo-doctoring were, in fact, the culprits of her "lost innocence." Still other articles, news reports, and web sites devoted to Ramsey's memory refer to her murder as the moment of "lost innocence."

The sweeping rhetorical gesture of innocence elicits a host of weighty connotations and bears a closer look at the assumptions behind it. The inherent attribution of innocence to childhood, discussed particularly in chapter one, performs several ideological tasks. Chiefly, it separates children from a space of impurity,

experience, knowledge (sexual or otherwise), or pain. In his study, “Nymphet Fantasies: Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence,” Henry Giroux remarks, “Shot through with political and ideological values, innocence is not merely selective about which children are endangered and need to be protected, but it also is used to signal who and what constitutes a threat to children....As an ethical referent, [it] humanizes the child and makes a claim on adults to provide them with security and protection. But innocence gains its meaning from a complex set of semiotic, material, and social registers.”⁹ Giroux rightfully foregrounds the contingencies of the appellation “innocence” by insisting that nothing self-evident exists about the abstraction—that much like the signifier *child*, *innocence* is also a multi-valent construct.

The reduction/condensation of innocence into the domain of childhood, scholar Anne Higonet argues, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Higonet, who traces the history of child pornography law from the 1980s to the present, chronicles the increasing disappearance of first amendment coverage to any provocative work of art including children and this disappearance’s connections to the rationale of preserving children’s innocence. Here, she remarks on the migration of innocence into the sole province of juvenility:

Once upon a time, innocence...could be variously located. Now we only seem able to find [it] in what we imagine to be the beleaguered bastion of childhood....For years, Americans have been becoming increasingly sure that they can and should interpret images of children, distinguish right images from wrong images, and punish offenders.¹⁰

Laura Green in a *Salon.com* essay points out the problematic assumptions about the transparency of innocence through a Kincaidian connection of contemporary child panics with Victorian culture. She muses,

Like the Victorians, 20th century readers thrill to the spectacle of imperiled little-girlhood, the essence of vulnerability....
Like the Victorians, we think of "innocence" as the opposite of "sex." Like the Victorians, we believe that little girls are asexual and therefore incarnate innocence. And like the Victorians, we are both fascinated and appalled by the spectacle of little girls' inevitable development into agents or objects of sexual desire. As testimony to our obsession with the sexual vulnerability of little girls, we have JonBenet Ramsey and faces on milk cartons; the Victorians had the "white slave trade" (the rumored kidnapping and sale of little girls into prostitution abroad) and Lewis Carroll.¹¹

Green remarks on both the cultural necessity of securing childhood as a space of innocence as well as the "thrilling spectacle" of that innocence endangered through its introduction to sexual knowledge. The online publication *The Onion* parodied the public's irrational associations of childhood with innocence in its satirical printing of a "guest column" by the dead Ramsey. Entitled, "Don't Feel Sad, I'm in Heaven Now Singing With the Pretty Angels," the column reads, "I sleep in a bed of moonbeams, covered in a blanket of clouds....Magical dewdrops scrub my pink face clean, and for breakfast I eat a bowl of sunbeams and starshine. I have lots of pretty dresses, and nobody ever makes me wear make-up or high heels."¹²

The parody draws on a host of clichés of childhood iconography that cast a ridiculous light on the conventional associations of childhood with a state of perpetual cuteness and cleanness. It also highlights the imaginative work required for the spectator of Ramsey to "cleanse" him/herself of the sexualized child image. Perhaps the

suggestion of the parody is that, just as spectators project their need for an idealized innocence onto the child's body and falsely naturalize that innocence, they--upon realizing the traumatic signs of juvenile sexuality--can resiliently reconstruct the delusional fantasy of the innocent child through inane clichés such as those offered in the “guest column.”

In this section, I refer to the rhetorical violence of the discourse of innocence because the revocation of that fictive notion of innocence, its unraveling through the exposure to images of sexualized children, produces an excess of aggression or anxiety that seems to be channeled into the very encounter with the object of the gaze. I return here to the words of Levine from the chapter's beginning. She describes the erotic appeal of the child's image and the simultaneous perception of the abhorrent nature of that appeal as a “psychosocial problem” that encourages the spectator to “project that eroticized desire outward, creating a monster to hate, hunt down, and punish.”¹³ This idea of the projection of “eroticized desire outward” in order to maintain an *innocent* relation to the *innocent* child is aligned with this dissertation's assertions that the spectator generates a bifurcated idea of the gaze—the gaze of innocence (which s/he uses) and a gaze of perversion that the “monster” wields.

Yet, in this final chapter, I want to complicate this process of disavowal and projection further by suggesting that, rather than simply imagining a pervert on the cultural margins whose gaze portends violation and degradation of the girl-child's body, the spectator also often unwittingly creates a “monster to hate” in the form of the very object of the gaze itself. My suggestion stems from the public perception that children

cannot bear, figuratively, or maybe even literally, the weight of signifying desire or desirability. When signs of desire or desirability are cathected onto the child's body, the body ceases to become pure, sacred, clean, something of worth. The child's ruination or defilement is cast as irrevocable, when in fact what is (seemingly) irrevocable is the *spectator's* ability to reconstruct the screen image of the pure child as *tabula rasa*. Thus, each exposure to the sexualized child is a cyclical trauma that replays the spectator's failure to screen an idealized purity or innocence onto childhood bodies successfully.

The rhetorical aggression brought to bear on Ramsey's body and memory plays out in many contexts, even in those whose participants are most sympathetic to the tragic events of December, 1996. As I taught a course at the University of Texas in Fall of 2000, entitled *The Rhetoric of the American Child*, I saw such aggression circulate in our discussions. In the course, we studied pictures, news footage, and journalistic accounts of the Ramsey murder case, as well as talk shows dealing with Ramsey and beauty pageant participants. When I solicited open-ended comments about the Ramsey case and the images we were studying, two of my students, one a part-time day care supervisor and the other, an early education major intending to work as a pre-school teacher, offered the following: "I...I...just...They ruined her. I'm glad she's dead. She's better off." And "She died long before she was killed. I mean, look at her. She wasn't a girl anymore."

While my students were certainly expressing anger towards Ramsey's parents for their orchestration of her sexualized image, it became clear that their anger was also directed at the image, and possibly by extension, the child as well. Since that course, I

have heard numerous people express similar aggressive sentiments about the case. A colleague of mine in graduate school, who is a strong feminist and an advocate of anti-violence, made a similar remark about Ramsey. As we were discussing various topics, among them—strangely enough—Dante’s *Inferno* and the progress of this dissertation chapter, she quipped, “I wonder what circle of hell JonBenet is in right now.” It was interesting for me to realize that people whose otherwise last inclination would be to “blame the victim” harbored animosities that seemed, in part, rooted in their vexed visual engagement with Ramsey.

The students’, as well as my colleague’s remarks about Ramsey, expose the highly charged, yet highly unstable mechanisms through which childhood innocence is upheld. As Levine puts it, “Current youth policy and parenting advice teeter between high-anxiety child protection and high-anger child punishment. It would appear that children are fragilely innocent until the moment they step over some line, at which point they become instantly, irredeemably wicked.”¹⁴ “Teetering” is a particularly nice description of the spectator’s psychic investment in the child’s innocence. It always already teeters, because the spectator gazes while perched on an untenably marked crag—one of his own construction that is always threatening to give way.

In a vein similar to the remark of my second student’s assertion that “[s]he died long before she was killed,” countless statements on the internet and in print gesture towards the conflation of her actual death with a sort of social death, in which her participation as a sexualized object entailed her no longer existing as a child. One such statement is found on a message board devoted to commiserating over Ramsey’s death.

The commenter writes, “We can all only hope that someday this case will be solved. It's a horrible crime when a young girl is robbed of her innocence at such a young age.

Hopefully one day she will be able to rest in peace.”¹⁵ The comment is puzzling in that it mentions the unsolved murder and then addresses the “crime” of “robbed innocence,” intimating that the crimes of murdering her and sexualizing her are one and the same.

While there has never been any evidence to suggest that Ramsey was murdered because of her involvement in beauty pageants or for portraying sexual maturity (apart from the hypothesis that she was raped and murdered by a crazed pedophile follower), comments about Ramsey persistently assume a causal relation between her sexualized presence and her murder.¹⁶ For example, Boston University Chancellor John Silber used Ramsey as a reason for advocating dismantling a support group for gay and lesbian students at a BU academy, reasoning that it encouraged premature sex. Silber complained that children received messages about sex “from the time they’re six years of age....Look at that little girl in Denver that got killed—all dressed up like a whore when she was five years old.”¹⁷ Silber’s rationale presumes a cause-and-effect relationship between her presentation as a five-year-old “whore” and her murder where none is likely to exist, based on the findings of the investigations.

CNN journalist Jeff Edmunds makes the same assumption or perhaps just a mistake in memory about the Ramsey case, when he explains the underwhelming performance of Adrian Lyne’s 1997 *Lolita*. In an attempt to place the public’s response to pedophilic themes in a socio-historical, he muses,

With the 1994 passage in New Jersey of Megan's Law, the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1995, and the murder of JonBenet

Ramsey in 1996, there is little tolerance for depictions of sex between adults and children, no matter what the context.¹⁸

Megan's Law, legislation that requires sex offenders to register with local law enforcement based on a case where a young girl was raped and murdered by a known sex offender who lived in the same community, references an actual event of child violence. While Edmunds never explicitly states that Ramsey's murder was sexually motivated, his choice in grouping her with legislation about actual instances or depictions of pedophilic sex indicates an unspoken connection between her eroticization and death.

Writing only a month after the Ramsey murder, journalist Anne Taylor Fleming makes a similar connection between Ramsey's mature and seductive appearance and her untimely death. Her tirade about the cultural trend of sexualizing young girls ends with the following rhetorical flourish:

So bring on the Lolitas, please, the younger, the better. Let them sit in [sic] the nation's knee and tickle its sexual fancy and sell its goods, and themselves, before they really even know what any of it means, what the cost might be. One grieves, of course, for Jonbenet, the woman child buried with a tiara on her head and a teddy bear in her arms, America's little Miss Mixed Metaphor who achieved fame all right, not as a beauty contestant but as a cautionary tale.¹⁹

Fleming explicitly labels the narrative of Ramsey a "cautionary tale," indicating that the cultural perception of her death is also marked by causality. The moral of the tale apparently, like Silber suggested above, is that sexualized children are likely to be murdered for their transgression of what constitutes "the child." Fleming, while asserting that grief, "of course," is in order for Ramsey, indulges rather aggressively in the

imaginings of the pedophile scenario. Albeit with outrage, she indulges the reader and herself with the clichéd icons of child violation: “Let them sit in [sic] the nation’s knee and tickle its fancy and sell its goods, and themselves.” The effect of her rhetoric is two-fold. It links the intimate scene of personal violation of the child with the greater quotidian exploitation of children in consumer and media culture; yet it also depends on a sort of voyeurism—on the vulgar and tactless evocation of the scene of violation—for its force. I suggest that aggressions similar to the ones I have described are immanent within rhetorical gestures like Fleming’s.

Interestingly, one of the only pieces written on Ramsey that overtly supports this critique of the violence inherent in espousing the causal connections between Ramsey’s eroticization and her death comes from right-wing journalist Gregory Flanagan. An advocate of the youth beauty pageant scene, he condemns the media’s association of Ramsey’s exhibition with her death on the grounds that it degrades girls for exemplifying heterosexual femininity. He writes,

[The media] exploited a murdered little girl to hatefully terrorize other girls in order to keep them from wanting to emulate JonBenet by implying that being in a pageant and dressing and behaving in a feminine way somehow contributed to her death....The message is, you had better not dare to express your femininity or to dress or act like a normal girl, if you’d do [sic] you will be treated as a subhuman object of ridicule who is declared to be a target for violence because you are a ladylike girl.... [A]n innocent little girl of five years old who is brutally murdered is called a “prostitute,” “tramp,” “bimbo,” and her parents are called pimps because she expresses her femininity.²⁰

Flanagan complains about the cultural climate in America and characterizes it as suppressing the feminine, heterosexual impulse in young girls. In contrast to the feminist

critique that presumes exploitation and objectification in juvenile feminine performance, Flanagan argues for the empowering aspects of a girl's rehearsal of womanly maturity. Like many pageant supporters, he contends that the successful mimesis of womanhood (or as he repeatedly stresses, "being a lady") instills self-esteem and a sense of maternal bonding.

Other manifestations of aggression towards Ramsey's eroticized image are more overt and unapologetically misogynistic. Jokes are circulating on the internet, which figure Ramsey as an active seductress. One such joke reads:

Q: What did Jon-Benet [sic] Ramsey say to her dad right before she died?

A: Ten to watch me dance...twenty for....

The joke insinuates that Ramsey was, indeed, "asking for" her death and that her father responded in a rage to his daughter's inappropriate advances. Journalist Adam Engel introduces an interview with an author writing about sexual abuse with the quip, "We all remember the baby face that launched a thousand hard-ons (at least) the Winter of 1996-97. She dressed like Mae West and moved like Josephine Baker and she was only six years old."²¹ A band named *Anal Pudding*, fashioning itself as a hipster throwback to the stylings of Frank Zappa and Deep Purple, released a song in 2002, entitled "JonBenet Ramsey Was a Hot Piece of Ass." Lyrics include such tasteless lines as the following:

Watching TV the other day, I saw this little momma named
JonBenet. Dancing around in a ballerina suit, for six years old,
she was pretty damn cute./ I see her dancing again and again;
I wanna give her candy so she'll be my friend./ Gonna get her
in the basement so I can do it./ Unfortunately her daddy beat
me to it....Looks like they're never gonna solve that case, but a
good piece of ass is a bad thing to waste.²²

With the exception of one line in the song, “My prime suspect would be her daddy, but the media be raping her just as badly,” where the group seems to potentially critique her exploitation in visual culture, the song derives its (arguable) humor from the brutal objectification of Ramsey’s body.

The above responses to Ramsey’s image indicate a nexus of revulsion around the sexualized child. In one optic, the anxieties generated by Ramsey’s image can be explained in terms of the ways that the spectator’s confrontation with it confounds or unsettles the relationship between innocence and childhood. In what follows, I examine the Ramsey phenomenon through other frames that deal more pointedly with the gendered aspects of the visual encounter with her image. While the analysis of childhood innocence has been crucial to the explanation of the spectator’s engagement with the eroticized girl, it is necessary to look at the way assumptions about gender, visual-cognitive processes, and defense mechanisms interact in the negotiation of the woman-child’s image.

The *Unheimlich* of Genders: Ramsey as Drag Princess

Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny or unhomely, is useful here to describe or, at least, analogize the spectator’s confrontation with the multi-valently gendered Ramsey. According to Freud, the experience of the uncanny “derives its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but--on the contrary--from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it.”²³ As one of the foundational narratives of identity, gender is at once the most homely and unhomely

“fixture” in psychic life. To “know” gender absolutely, transparently, is one of the givens of hetero-normativity. In binary logic, gender follows from sex; sexual orientation from gender; object choice from sexual orientation. What is more, hetero-normative desire resides, precisely, “at home,” contained within a monogamous union of heterosexual maturity. The case of the eroticized child, particularly of Ramsey, disrupts the canniness of the hetero-normative. Freud’s *unheimlich* entails a portentous glimpse of death; the uncanny experience of the eroticized child, I argue, necessitates the death, the undoing, of gender’s ontology. This discussion explores two manifestations of the *unheimlich* that are not entirely separate—JonBenet Ramsey’s uncanny incarnations as drag performer and living doll.

In this section, I argue for the value in looking at the theorization of drag performance in order to account for the complex and fraught responses to the image of the eroticized girl. Critical theory about drag and transvestism is rooted in the medium’s potential for gender subversion, for the exploration of gender fluidity, and the ways its performances may complicate distinctions between inner and outer psychic space and trouble the notions of original gender identities.²⁴ I do not adopt the discourse of drag here in an effort to celebrate its possibilities for transgression. Nor do I believe that queering the spectacle of JonBenet Ramsey offers any particularly liberatory re-envisioning of her status as a performer or as an agent. My focus lies in the consequences of the reactive mechanisms employed by the spectator to re-orient his/her position as a desiring subject in the face of the encounter with the queered child image.

I'd like to consider first drag as a form of *transvestism*. Literally, the term transvestism means "dressing across." The assumption, of course, inherent in the term is that one dresses across sexes. Here I propose one of two moves: looking at the significance of "dressing across" other categories of identity, or, considering the multiplicities of genders available for identification, recognizing the presence of "girl-genders" and "woman-genders" that have some meaningful demarcations between or among them. While the term transvestism and its implications of "dressing across" may seem naïve in light of more sophisticated and free-form conceptions of gender proliferations, where no real *line* is to be crossed, putting pressure on the term to explain the sort of "drag" that an image like JonBenet performs may let us think about the *line* that is crossed in the girl's performance of feminine maturity.

The realization that drag performance may involve the transgression of identity boundaries apart from mere sex-gender distinctions is nothing new. Jennie Livingston's 1990 *Paris Is Burning* documents the complex circuitry of the New York City drag balls, showing competition in various realms of "realness" beyond simple gender designations. The permeability of racial and class-based demarcations is explored through performances of categories like "Town and Country," "Businessman," etc. Critics like Ann Cvetkovich and bell hooks have remarked on the film's situation of gender, race, and class as sites for the contestation of "realness" and the material stakes of passing in these contexts.²⁵ Yet, a discussion of the performance of adult/child identities seems lacking in drag discourse.

The one instance I have encountered in my research where this topic is broached is a passing comment in Eve Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, where she describes her juvenile precocity as a perpetual experience of inauthenticity. She relates, "[W]hat being a kid was like for me was, at the same time, like being an adult in bad drag as a child, and being a child in bad drag as an adult."²⁶ While Sedgwick uses drag as a metaphor to emphasize that "child" and "adult" are, to some degrees, roles to be assumed, this description does not deal with a corporeal, "staged" performance of transvestism.

The drag performance of Jonbenet Ramsey is rooted in the *trompe l'oeil* of feminine sexual maturity. Throughout her career, she successfully performed "good drag." Thus, in Ramsey's sexualized image, the spectator is confronted with all the trappings of sensuous feminine maturity. Her image adheres to the cultural standards of white feminine beauty. At age five, Ramsey underwent bridgework to extract her "baby" teeth and have them replaced with an "adult" smile. She wore wigs and used heavy face make-up. An 18-year-old beauty pageant veteran was hired to instruct her in her carriage and gestures, and in how to convey sensuality through her facial expressions and mannerisms. Interestingly, her name is both a feminization and a frenchification of her father John Bennett and resonates with gay drag sensibility.

Ramsey has become a broad cultural reference in queer communities because of her very connections to drag performance. In the Fall of 1997, ten months after her death, a number of queers threw a large JonBenet-themed Halloween party in Houston. At the party were many drag queens dressed like the images displayed on television of Ramsey. In 2001, two drag queens staged a one-night show entitled the "JonBenet

Ramsey Memorial Beauty Contest.”²⁷ New York City performance artist Penny Arcade, a.k.a. Susanna Ventura, employed a group of back-up dancers for one of her 2003 shows, calling them the “JonBenet Ramsey Memorial Dancers.” Examples of Ramsey’s appropriation in queer contexts abound, indicating the extent to which her pageant life has been read as a career in drag.

The drag image of Ramsey, I argue, succeeds in doing several things simultaneously. It has the potential to evoke a visceral response to the successfully mimicked trappings of mature feminine beauty. Yet, it also may generate an awareness, once the spectator has contextualized the image as a juvenile’s “performance” of feminine maturity, that the spectator can be “trapped” in a desiring gaze, not through some holistic understanding of the gazed-at object, but through its fetishized parts. If the hetero-normative narrative of desire, as Eve Sedgwick suggests, is founded in the union of two clearly and differently gendered mature subjects, it unravels upon the revelation that fragments of feminine signification may be sufficient to entice the spectator. That the perception of the erotic may be culturally conditioned, that the spectator has been taught to valorize arbitrary signs of the feminine casts the encounter with the eroticized child as a queer phenomenon.

This encounter brings me back to the assessment of Mencken, that men “estimate beauty.” Ramsey’s illusory mature femininity demonstrates pointedly Mencken’s assertion that men “show no talent whatever for differentiating between the artificial and the real.” The “estimation” of women, the calculation of desire’s parts, rather than the transparent perception of the desirable whole, underscores the spectator’s inadequacies in

“reading” the feminine erotic properly. I stated earlier that each encounter with the image of the eroticized child entailed a cyclical trauma. Though I previously located this trauma in the failure of the spectator to project innocence seamlessly onto the child’s body, I am convinced that the experience of the uncanny may characterize this moment more precisely. The erotic gaze at Ramsey, so violently checked by the recognition that one has gazed wrongly, superficially, fetishistically, prompts a traumatic reappraisal of the spectator’s aptitude in reading the proper feminine as well as an upheaval of the sense of gender’s homeliness.

This traumatic recognition replays with every viewing. The encounter is utterly cinematic, staging a nightmare of dislocation from gendered sense and from a self that has come to be defined by the propriety and authority of desiring. In short, every encounter with the eroticized child is a primal scene of radical estrangement from the hetero-normative. It re-enacts the same rupture of sense, of sexual homeliness that Neil Jordan’s 1992 *The Crying Game* does in its pivotal primal scene. I refer here to the moment when cross-dresser Dil, who has lost her lover to the IRA, exposes her penis to the unsuspecting Fergus. A quick change of camera angles marks the bedroom shot, where Dil disrobes, shifting from Fergus’ point of view where we see the unveiling of Dil’s penis to a disorienting two-shot of the couple, to a POV of Dil, witnessing Fergus’s reaction of horror. The camera then tracks Fergus running to the bathroom where he vomits profusely. As Dil cries plaintively that she thought Fergus “knew” her secret, Fergus continues to vomit off-screen. He then re-enters the bedroom, and, as Dil tries to comfort him, the shocked and angry Fergus strikes Dil in the face, drawing blood from

her lip. Fergus, in his knowledge that he has incorrectly “estimated” Dil’s femininity, lashes out in violent reprisal, channeling his anger into the object he has misread.

Similarly, in Kimberley Peirce’s 1999 *Boys Don’t Cry*, transgendered Brandon Teena becomes the object of an involuntary unveiling of her anatomical sex, which the men in the film Tom and John perceive to be at odds with her gender. The same disorienting and turbulent camerawork marks the brutal uncovering of Brandon’s body, as Brandon’s lover Lana and the men look on with fascination. The film chooses not to capture Brandon’s genitalia, but instead focuses on the reactions to the discovery of the three, and even shoots Brandon in an out-of-body moment, witnessing his own violation from the door of the bathroom where this assault takes place. The moment is different from *The Crying Game*’s in that the spectator anticipates what is to be discovered in the unveiling. Yet, it forces the viewer to insert herself into this melee of aggressive reinterpretation of Brandon’s body. This primal scene of discovery precipitates the merciless rape and murder of Brandon, whom Tom and John pronounce “a deviate, a freak.”

I use these cinematic depictions of a primal scene of gender’s unhomeliness to illustrate that the workings of genderfuck within these scenarios are similar to the manipulations of adult/child drag that structure the encounter with the eroticized child. The performance of post-pubescent femininity by a pre-pubescent actor engenders gender’s unhomeliness. It also opens the question of the various genders that might be immanent within the sex-gender system—that is to say, the presence of “girl-genders” or “woman-genders,” or “boy-genders” or “man-genders”—and how they may derive from

different notions of agency, access to knowledge and self-knowledge, sexual and social accessibility, relation to experience, and bodily maturity. The image of the eroticized child, containing a superimposition of several conflicting genders, produces anxiety through this very seepage of gender identities into one another.

Ramsey and the Performance of the Living Doll

I have discussed the traumatic encounter with the eroticized child rather monolithically in this chapter. In doing so, I am not trying to account for a universalized spectator-position, but instead to argue that this anxiety is produced within a multitude of spectators. Not only the heterosexual male is conditioned to respond to certain cultural iconographies of beauty, nor is he the only one who responds to these images with some form of desire. I hoped to show in these examples that this anxiety is located across many subject positions, even those characterized by strong feminist and pro-child sensibilities. What I have not accounted for thus far in the chapter is the spectator who may gaze at the eroticized child without anxiety, without conflict or any apparent trauma. It is here that I introduce the Living Doll, another manifestation of the *unheimlich*, to describe another lens through which the spectator may view Ramsey's image.

Freud used the spectator's relation to the doll to explain the *unheimlich*. He describes the adult as having an unsettling response to dolls, waxworks, mannequins, and other inanimate objects that mimic personhood because their immobility signifies death. Children, however, view the world of objects animistically, having little sense of distinction between living things and lifeless toys. A greater understanding of mortality

makes the growing child attach uncanny feelings to dolls; they become more corpse-like and less a plaything.²⁸ Miriam Formanek-Brunell argues that doll play, in its nineteenth-century form, often involved a child's abusing or burying the doll in order to learn about death and mourning.²⁹ The doll as a recognizable emblem of death forces an encounter with the unhomely.

The image of JonBenet Ramsey is enmeshed with the idea of the doll at several rhetorical locations. The media has often described Ramsey and other young pageant performers as living dolls; in fact, the pageants themselves use the idiom of the doll to ground their competitions. A Spring 1996 edition of the magazine *Pageant Life* announced a contest for the title of "America's Missy Miss Overall Living Doll Photogenic Queen." The wake of Ramsey's death, characterized by a national fascination with the child beauty pageant scene, prompted HBO to produce a documentary entitled *Living Dolls: The Making of a Child Beauty Queen*.

Perhaps the most troubling association of Ramsey with the figure of the doll comes in John and Patsy Ramsey's novelistic account of the disappearance and discovery of their daughter's body. Patsy, chronicling the "premonitions" she experienced of JonBenet's death, writes the following:

I lifted the lid slowly. The doll lay silently in the long white box with her eyes closed. For a split second, I had a horrible feeling. The beautiful doll with golden hair looked like JonBenet lying in a coffin! I was so shocked that I caught my breath. I had to blink several times. It was a momentary, but horrible, feeling.

Recounting her traumatic, uncanny encounter with the "My Twinn" Doll as she prepares to wrap it for her daughter, Patsy Ramsey seizes on the morbidity of the immobile doll.

It is interesting that she describes this encounter with the deathly doll as providing uncanny information about her daughter's fate, while her relationship with her daughter has centered around the promotion of her as a "living doll" within the pageantry circuit. Yet, the association of Ramsey with the doll is profound; just as dolls stage a deathly encounter, so does our gaze at JonBenet Ramsey. Images of her did not proliferate until after her death. Thus, the spectator was and continues to be confronted by a figure who is not only uncanny in the multiple femininities she embodies, but whose image references an already dead girl. The imbrication of doll/corpse is complete in her image.

Ramsey has been a celebrated figure both in the pageantry milieu and also among doll enthusiasts. Within the year after her death, over forty websites were constructed to honor her memory. Many of them contained pictures of Ramsey from her pageant days, as well as pictures that had been doctored to superimpose angels' wings and halos onto her body. Some showed her resting in clouds surrounded by angels; others placed her in virginal white robes. The sites often contained poems written to the memory of Ramsey, sometimes addressed to her and sometimes written in her own voice. Many of the people who constructed websites in her honor also wrote about their passionate involvement with dolls, identifying with a subculture that has grown exponentially over the last decade with the advent of television shows such as the "Gallery of Dolls" on the Home Shopping Network.

Given Ramsey's repeated cultural inscription as a "Living Doll," it is not surprising that those most ardent about producing a public expression of grief and most compelled to memorialize the dead girl are also involved in the commerce of doll culture.

Yet, it becomes important here to account for the lack of the uncanny, the absence (or at least, deep repression) of anxiety about gazing at the Ramsey image that is evident through this subculture's response to her as an icon of girlhood and "doll"-ness. Several related factors may account for this radically different encounter with the Living Doll.

The doll as figure of the *unheimlich* is rooted in a paradox in terms of its relation to death and mobility. Freud theorizes that the adult who understands mortality is unsettled through the morbidly totemic doll/corpse figure. Yet, the doll may also be read as an embodiment of suspended animation, a figure that freezes youth, vitality, and beauty in a Keatsian gesture towards the eternal. Thus, the doll becomes a totem of loss, but perhaps for some, a figure that accesses the lost object, the lost life. Howard Beale, in his essay "The Unheimlich Maneuver," suggests that contemporary American culture is indeed inclined to paper the cracks of mortality with fetishistic representations of eternal youth. He writes, "We are a nation obsessed with simulation and suspended animation, from the bronzed baby shoe to the open-casketed Loved One 'revamped...to look like a living doll,'"³⁰ In light of this, perhaps the fetishizing of the doll prevents the traumatic encounter of the death totem. It casts the doll, and by extension, the image of the child, as material and/or visual access to the child's presence, safety, and, of course, innocence.

If, as I have argued in this chapter, anxiety around the eroticized child is produced in part by the perception of the image as a compulsively repetitive drag performance that shatters gender stability and the authority of the gaze, then the spectator who lacks this response of anxiety is important to theorize. The spectator who reads in the image of the

erotic child an unsettling display of conflicting gender identities recognizes the gradations of feminine identity that are anchored in notions of differently situated agency, access to knowledge, bodily maturity, and life experience. Conversely, it seems, the spectator who does not experience the child through the lens of drag may be disinclined to view feminine identity as having possible gradations. Rather than experiencing the image as fraught or contradictory in its multiple enunciations of desire vis-à-vis visual cues that inscribe maturity or sexual knowledge, this spectator perhaps sees the image as femininity in miniature. That is, this spectator does not read the child as improperly or untimely sexed or gendered, but instead presumes an always already objectified femininity that inheres in the girl as well as the woman. What some see as exploitative objectification of an innocent girl, others sees as “femininity training,” the preparation for a continuous life of being read as an object.³¹

In her work on early twentieth-century star and producer Mary Pickford, Gaylyn Studlar explains the public’s prolonged fascination with Pickford-as-child/child star long after her entrance into mature femininity as an instance of the *pedophilic gaze* at work. She addresses Pickford’s partial complicity in the sustenance of this gaze through her continued infantilization in the roles she took, the clothes she wore, and the mannerisms that characterized her performances even as an adult.³² In a move similar to the theoretical leanings of this dissertation, she proposes that Pickford engaged in a “masquerade of childishness...that bears some structural similarities to the masquerade often cited in feminist film theory.”³³ Studlar continues,

Rather than performing the cultural codes expected to construct womanliness, Pickford assumed the signs of childishness that

rendered her womanly aesthetic perfection and her erotic potential innocent and safe. . . . [H]er masquerade of childishness undercut her potential for sexual subjectivity. It did not undercut her potential to be a sexual object.³⁴

This discussion of masquerade leads Studlar to suggest that Pickford “appealed to and through a kind of cultural pedophilia that looked to the innocent child-woman to personify nostalgic ideals of femininity.”³⁵ Studlar portrays the erotic encounter with Pickford’s image as containing a multitude of codes of the feminine that worked to preserve a Victorian notion of innocence and an arousing aesthetic of child-womanliness. She argues that the emergence of the empowered, almost masculinized New Woman in the teens and twenties provoked anxieties that women were in danger of unsettling traditional gender dynamics and that Pickford’s masquerade of childishness helps to assuage these fears about women’s transgression through her regressive portrayal of a non-threatening, yet still alluring innocence.

My argument in this chapter produces another perspective on the *pedophilic gaze*, contextualized in late twentieth century concerns over child endangerment and the propriety of desirous gazing. Studlar’s *pedophilic gaze* explains how an early twentieth century performance of childishness could both promote desire and assuage anxieties in the spectator regarding the instabilities of gender. The *pedophilic gaze* in its contemporary manifestation, while a gaze of desire to be sure, has the opposite effect. Inherent in this gaze at this cultural moment is a great degree of anxiety and unease. Of course, it can be argued—and Studlar mentions this—that anxiety over Pickford’s image was largely absent due to the spectator’s ultimate knowledge that Pickford was, in fact,

an adult portraying a child. Yet, there existed in this gaze a certain playful crisscrossing of girl and woman identities. The “crisscrossing” entailed in the image of the contemporary eroticized child, particular embodied in Jonbenet Ramsey, is read as perilous, ontologically harmful, and corrupting both spectator and object alike. What is more, as I have suggested, this anxiety and consequent aggression towards this image often is cathected onto the object of that gaze, to violent effect.

Earlier, I stated that, within post-Victorian and particularly contemporary American logic, the child, as the culture’s embodiment of innocence, cannot bear the weight of signifying desire and desirability. Let me end with the exhortation that the child, as an actual embodiment of complex desires and drives, *should* not bear the weight of signifying innocence. The greater the fervor with which the spectator projects this innocence onto the child, the greater the dangerous surplus of reactive violence is wielded upon both the child and the figure of the queer outsider who is ideologically designated as its true threat. Understanding better what it *means* to be juvenile—as an experience contiguous to or embroiled in, not *apart from* sexuality, knowledge, pain, difficulty, and challenge—can enable the spectator to dismiss more easily the lie of innocence and to view not as a betrayal, but as a way of existing, the child who lives, breathes, feels, and dresses up.

¹ Levine, Judith. *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002: 27.

² See Gaylyn Studlar's recent work on the pedophilic gaze and young femininity. *The Children's Culture Reader*, edited by Henry Jenkins, contains many good critiques that situate commodity culture at the heart of childhood exploitation in America.

³ See Debra Merskin's "Reviving Lolita?" in *American Behavioral Scientist* for an analysis of this trend in advertising.

⁴ While the dissertation focuses on visual culture, I feel that this trend in aestheticizing the improperly aged love object in popular music is an important cultural index for understanding particularly American attitudes about the ambivalence of intergenerational desire.

⁵ Lyric excerpts from Bobby Vee's *Come Back When You Grow Up*, Steve Lawrence and Donny Osmond's versions of *Go Away, Little Girl*, and Osmond's *Sweet and Innocent*.

⁶ Kincaid, James. *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child-Molesting*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998: 13.

⁷ Ramsey, John Bennett and Patsy. *The Death of Innocence*. Nashville: Nelson Books, 2000.

⁸ Kincaid 53.

⁹ Giroux, Henry. "Nymphet Fantasies: Child Beauty Pageants and the Politics of Innocence." *Social Text*. No. 57 (Winter, 1998), 31-53.

¹⁰ Higgonet, Anne. "Conclusions Based on Observation." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 9.1, 1996.

¹¹ Green, Laura. "Alice in MirrorLand." <http://www.salon.com/july97/alice970730.html>,

¹² <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/8543/991006.htm>, accessed November 3, 2004.

¹³ Levine vi.

¹⁴ Levine xxxi-xxxii.

¹⁵ www.marthamoxley.com/guestbook/guestbook-5.htm, November 3, 2004.

¹⁶ Although autopsy reports indicate that there was vaginal tearing discovered, the conclusion was that most likely the murderer made Ramsey look like she had been sexually assaulted posthumously.

¹⁷ www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/1191.html

¹⁸ Edmunds, Jeff. "'Lolita': Complex, often tricky and 'a hard sell'" CNN.com, April, 1999.

<http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/books/1999/nabokov/lolita.sociological.essay/>

¹⁹ Fleming, Anne Taylor. "Little Women." January 24, 1997.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/essays/fleming_1-24.html, November 7, 2004.

²⁰ Flanagan, Gregory. "Is the Value of a Person's Life Measured by the Prejudice of Others?" *Liberation Journal*. http://www.libertocracy.com/Webessays/freespeech/hatecrimes/political_hate.htm

²¹ Engel, Adam. "Raising JonBenet: A Review of *Cowboy's Sweetheart* by Walter Davis". *Dissident Voice*.

http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Articles9/Engel_Davis-Review-Interview.htm, November 4, 2004.

²² <http://www.soundclick.com/genres/chartssub.cfm%3Fgenre%3DComedy%26subgenre>, November 5, 2004.

²³ Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. & trs. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953), pp. 219-252

²⁴ These general observations are made in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

²⁵ Cvetkovich, Ann (1993) "The Powers of Seeing and Being Seen: *Truth or Dare* and *Paris is Burning*", in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds.) (1993) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 155-169. and hooks, bell. "Is Paris Burning?," in [Black Looks: Race and Representation](#). Cambridge: South End Press, 1992.

²⁶ Sedgwick, Eve. *A Dialogue on Love*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, p. 30.

²⁷ "How Two Smart Drag Queens Galvanized Seattle's Rock Scene." www.thestranger.com/2001-08-09.

²⁸ I am indebted here to Lee Anne Gallaway's discussion of dolls and the uncanny as she uses Freud to work through dolls and orphanhood in her conference paper entitled, "Haunting the Nursery: Dolls, Orphans, and Mourning in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*,

²⁹ Brunell, *The Children's Culture Reader*. Pp. 363-377.

³⁰ Beale, Howard. "The Uneimlich Maneuver." <http://suck.com/daily/97/03/28/daily.html>. Beale, in the final part of this quote, refers to Jessica Mitford's words in her book *The American Way of Death*. London: Hutchinson Press, 1963..

³¹ This term, I recognize, is productively fraught, because it references a long tradition of indoctrination into feminine performance, whether in context like charm school or training for pageants, yet it has also come to refer to transsexual and transgendered subjects' indoctrination into passing sexually.

³² Richard Maltby undertakes a similar study, finding that Shirley Temple's persona had to mediate between her role as innocent child and that of glamorized female star in his paper "Shirley Temple and the Innocence of Popular Music", given at the Soundtracking Conference on Popular Music and the Media, Sheffield, July 1999.

³³ Studlar, Gaylyn. "'Oh 'Doll Divine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade and the Pedophilic Gaze.'" *Camera Obscura*. 16.3 (2001) 197-227: 205.

³⁴ Studlar 206.

³⁵ Studlar 208.

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