

The Pedophilia of Everyday Life

By Richard D. Mohr

Nearly every week, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America places a full-page display ad in the business section of the *New York Times*. The often gorgeous designs of the ads are as subtle as their overt messages are blunt: Drugs Scramble Your Brain. Fire Employees Suspected of Drug Use – It’s For Their Own Good. Drug Use Cuts Corporate Profits. That sort of thing. In their iconography, however, the ads roam over a much wider social field and frequently convey insidious messages – ones no less powerful for their indirection.

An easy case: a disproportionately high percentage of these ads picture a professional woman as the drug user in need of social disciplining. Frequently these women are the only women to be seen anywhere in the *Times*’ business section. The ads freight these pages with the message that women do not belong in business – they belong somewhere else. The ad campaign uses America’s demonization of drugs as both an energy source and vehicle for advancing an agenda of “traditional family values.”

It should not then come as much of a surprise that the ad campaign also includes iconography which links, indeed virtually identifies, demon drug-use with being gay. Several times over the last three years, Drug-Free America has run an ad which features a nearly life-size portrait of a sylph-like boy. You have to look twice to tell that it is a boy, for he is coded all over with signs of femininity. His lips are slightly glossed, slightly pursed. His posture coy. His head tilts forward over a unisex sweater causing luscious and illuminated blond tresses to cascade over one eye. The other looks seductively at the camera – square at you. The arc formed by his neck and hair continues on to a plastic tube which he holds towards cocaine lined on a mirror, which in turn reflects his image. Indulgent and languorous, Narcissus invites you to drown with – in – him.

The caption’s huge *sans serif* headline reads: “It used to be, at 13, little boys became interested in little girls.” What is the unstated antistrophe? One obvious possibility is “But now little boys are becoming interested in drugs.” The copy, dripping with nostalgia and, like the caption, cast in the Norman Rockwell tense – the imperfect – continues: “Boys and girls used to use straws to sip sodas at the drug store.” Our world is out of kilter, things are somewhat queer. At a minimum, drug-use is billed as arresting heterosexual development. It deflects youth from the culturally proper object of erotic choice (coke replaces ‘woman’). And it disrupts the social rituals by which culture prods youth along nature’s path (snorting replaces courting). But this verbal flag of deviance is not entirely queer, for it fails to establish for the youth a positively-limned perverted identity. The ad’s iconography takes up this chore. It layers over the boy both of the tropes by which our civilization marks out perverted male sexuality: sexual inversion (being a woman trapped in a man’s body) and bad object choice (desiring a man rather than a woman).

The codes of femininity which engulf the boy iconographically suggest that a feminine essence is seeping through the shell, the pores, of his marginally male body. The boy – really, deep down – is a girl. The caption’s cadences invite us to another possible antistrophic horror: “It used to be that little boys became interested in little girls, but now – with drugs – little boys become little girls.” The ad would have us believe that more than corrupting the body, drugs corrupt, pervert, the soul.

A man's boy

But what of the lad's enticing glance? This provides him with a bad object choice-- you, the viewer. It is practically an axiom of contemporary art theory that the gaze of the viewer is presumptively a male gaze. But even without theory, we know that overwhelmingly the readership of the *Times*' business pages is going to be male. The boy's come-hither glance is for a man. He invites the man to become absorbed in his gaze. As a consequence, the boy's association with drugs makes him doubly homosexual-- as having both inverted gender and improper object choice. The ad uses homosexuality and drugs to mutually demonize each other. But the ad achieves this identification only at a high and surprising price: The ad is so thickly laden with codes and subterfuges that, top-heavy, it inadvertently trips over its intentions and unwittingly reveals new ranges of meaning. Through the very glamour and lure which the ad uses to homosexualize its subject, it turns its viewer into a pedophile. The sumptuous layout gives the boy a sensuous, enticing star quality. Paradoxically the very medium of its anti-gay message makes the boy sexy to men.

Perhaps we have here an example of what Foucault hints at when in the *History of Sexuality* he repeatedly but vaguely refers to "perverse implantations," those means by which culture instills or invokes sexual desires, rather than represses or punishes them. The ad gives its viewer ideas, ones that he might very well not have had otherwise. If not exactly nudging him toward action, the ideas at least open the mind to new possibilities for actions; and they do so, even though they are put forth in a context of condemnation and suppression. Thus for Foucault, psychiatrists create perversions even as they are ostensibly trying to suppress them; insane asylums make their inhabitants crazy; and prisons produce, rather than rehabilitate, the criminal type. Similarly, the ad, even as it demonizes sexual perversion, implants in the mind of the beholder the idea of the most condemned perversion of all.

Pedophilic images are surprisingly common in society-- surprising given that society careers from hysteria to hysteria over the possible sexiness of children. Society seems to need these images. And the images are allowed to the extent that they are buffered, not read in the first instance as sexual representations, and do not develop beyond mere suggestive idea into a pedophilic discourse, a context of meaning for the pedophile. Indeed the social requirement that the pedophile's existence be shadowy helps realize the social requirement that sexy images of children will not be read as such. Society needs the pedophile: his existence allows everyone else to view sexy children innocently. But his conceptualization by society must not be allowed to be rich enough to be interesting, to constitute a life. Sexy images of children abound, but NAMBLA remains a universal whipping boy.

Society's panicked worry then is not chiefly about the sexiness of kiddy pics-- either as something inherently dirty or as having aesthetic, erotic, and moral effects on people in general. Rather, social conventions simultaneously insist upon and convulse over the existence of a certain type of *mind*, one which -- quite independently of what it sees and does -- can be branded as perverted. This becomes even clearer if one sorts through the tangle of statutes, regulations, administrative interpretations, and judicial decisions that makes up current kiddy porn law.

All in the mind's eye

What makes a picture of a kid into kiddy porn? For starters, the child's being naked, even partially naked, is not a necessary condition for kiddy porn. Under the current administration, the child pictured

may be completely clothed and the picture may still be considered indictable kiddie porn. Further, the child need not be performing any act that would be socially counted as sexual in order for the picture to still be legally treated as kiddie porn. Nor need the child even be posed provocatively, lewdly, or seductively. But then what's left? What distinguishes kiddie porn from Christmas snapshots? The mind of the beholder. The image is kiddie porn if it is possessed by someone who, quite independently of the image's content, can be considered perverted. And whether or not parents find themselves indicted for bear-rug and bathtub shots of their kids turns on what prosecutors (and juries) think was in the parent's mind in taking the photos – rather than on anything distinctive about the pictures themselves. It is the mind, not the image, that is dispositive.

Insulate that mind from the rest of the culture, label it perverted, and sexy children are alright. We see them – virginal and alluring – in mainstream clothing ads. Havana Joe Boots invites the straight male yuppie readers of *Details* to “Save Your Sole,” even as you lose it (your soul, that is) in the bare butt of a naked, ambiguously sexed child, tush thrust camera-ward.

On the back page of the *New York Times Magazine's* special issue on children (October 9, 1995) and on billboards up and down the Metro-North commuter lines, Tommy Hilfiger ads display a naked-tummied, adultly dressed boy of about six dangling insouciantly from a branch. His tongue slurps the air. His boxer shorts scooch up above his belt loops just as underwear does in adult jeans ads which everyone acknowledges as sexy in the main because of this joint peek-a-boo revelation of torso and boxers. A cliché of cultural studies holds that wearing briefs says “I have a penis,” while wearing boxers says “I am the penis.” Nevertheless, stamp the ad, with its child phallus, “not kiddie porn,” for it incidentally serves as a promotion for the *Times's* favorite child-oriented charity, the Fresh Air Fund.

Using social concern as a pedophilic medium is also the lucky gambit of photographer Larry Clark's movie, *Kids*. The hugely successful media blitz attending the movie's release carefully avoided any reference to, let alone an examination of, Clark's history of obviously pedophilic photographs – *Teenage Lust* (1983, 1987), *1992*, and *Die perfecte Kindheit* (1993). The publisher of the last collection of photos, fearing customs seizures, has not released the book in the United States. The collections include photos of Clark himself cavorting naked with naked boys in fountains. Indeed Clark himself – an ex-con – was nowhere in evidence during the media blitzes. Instead the morning TV shows offered a parade of latter-day Officer Krupkes – Krupkes with PhD's – to discuss what the hell's the matter with kids today, to bemoan their “social diseases,” and to praise the pseudo-documentary's realism and grit in facing or at least showing these problems. Drug taking, cat kicking, petty thievery, unsafe sex, public urination, assault – you name it – Clark has carefully larded his film with kids' naughty doings in order to distract the critics' view from the cinemagraphic point of the movie which is to linger on naked boys – naked boys spritzing each other, naked boys relaxing in hustler poses, naked boys shooting the macho breeze, naked boys showing off their cocks. Moralizing becomes, like the Fresh Air Fund, both a vehicle and buffer for prurient interest.

The film's pseudo-documentary style compliments the effects of its moralizing content. The documentary style makes the pretense of simply “presenting the facts” – a would-be charitable and disinterested act. But this posturing simply serves to insulate both director and viewer from taking responsibility for the movie's voyeurism, its visual lusting for kids.

The movie's final scene – the sleepy aftermath to a teenage orgy of sex and drugs – is a take-off on Michelangelo's 1492 sculpture "Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs" with its swarm of naked male flesh deployed for a good moral cause – saving women, who, however, are conveniently absent from the sculpture. With Clark, the swarm of naked male flesh hugged and caressed by the roving camera is kiddy flesh, all deployed for a good cause. The gorgeous support-actor awakens shocked to the glistening carnage and, as the movie's last line, queries for the Krupkes, "Jesus Christ. What happened?" This ending is laughable, but the critics ate it up like talk-show fodder.

A live virus vaccine

Everyday pedophilic iconography can even be used as a force for innocence. Such is Michael Jackson's 1995 videographic appropriation of Maxfield Parrish's 1922 pedophilic painting "Daybreak" as part of Jackson's return and rehabilitation from charges of child molestation. Despite its central image of a pubis-exposed ten-year old in the pose of a succuba, the Parrish painting has stood as a cultural icon on a par with Durer's "Praying Hands." Today, in the afterglow of Norman Rockwell, it seems hard to imagine, but by the end of the 1920s, one in every four American house holds had purchased a print of the Parrish painting with its fulsome depiction of a wholly naked sylph, hands to knees, leaning over a supine wakening woman clad in flowing robes, framed by Grecian columns, all set against flowering trees, a peaceful lake, and purple misty mountains.

Jackson remakes this image to accompany the first love-song released as a single, "You Are Not Alone," from his double-album *HIStory: Book I*. A convincing love-song from Michael is going to be a tough sell given the cultural backdrop of the molestation charges. In August 1993, a twelve-year old boy accused Jackson in a civil lawsuit of sexually molesting him over a four-month period the previous year. Jackson denied the accusations, but settled out-of-court for an undisclosed sum that some estimates said amounted to millions of dollars. What to do? Well, the thirty-seven year old black man re-casts himself in the role of Parrish's ten-year old white all-but-genderless sylph. Iconographically he regains for himself his earlier status as child star and sends the recuperative messages: How can I be a child molester when I am a child myself? How can I even be sexual since I do not have a sex? I'm not a sexual threat: I'm white.

He reconfigures and neutralizes the picture's succuba overtones by substituting for the reclining Arcadian the woman whom he married after the molestation charges broke into the general press, Lisa Marie Presley. By contrast to Jackson she looks in the video like a beached whale. Here artistic effect is sacrificed in order to heterosexualize the video's hero. Jackson deploys Parrish's pedophilic image to make himself over to appear as innocent as a child-bride, while also pressing the view that if there are any pedophiles around – and there may well be – they are in the audience, not in the frame.

Who needs an All Party Congress to restore one to grace when one can use images homeopathically. Jackson is cured by a dose of the very poison that ailed him. He has brilliantly recycled and teased America with a pedophilic image, which he has stunned and altered so that it can serve as a live-virus vaccine against the very charges of pedophilia laid against him. And it worked. He's back.

By contrast, during the week that I drafted this article, a journalism professor at Toronto's prestigious Ryerson Polytechnic University was suspended for having suggested in class that not all acts of

intergenerational sex should be counted as child abuse. Looking is okay, thinking about these issues is not.

Why does the American national psyche need the pedophilia of everyday life? What drive does it stoke, even as the nation condemns any mention or thought of it? Following the lead of some other social critics like Kenneth Plummer and James Kincaid, Walter Kendrick argues in a brave piece for the *New York Times Magazine's* all-kids issue that our contemporary understanding of childhood as a period of innocence and purity began only in the Victorian era, and that before then, going back to the Middle Ages, children were viewed simply as little adults.

Apparently having gone about as far as he felt he dared in the *Times*, Kendrick concludes by pointedly reducing the anxiety that these revelations no doubt stir in the average reader: "Today's hysteria over child pornography springs mainly from adults' fear of themselves, the guilty knowledge that you don't have to be a pedophile to get an occasional frisson from looking at children." But guilty self-knowledge does not hysterical witch-hunts make; one simply lies low. True: today's hysteria springs mainly from adults' fear of themselves, but this fear issues from their half-recognition that to admit explicitly, as pornography does, that children are sexy would mean that virtually everyone is a pedophile. In light of the current cultural view that sexual interest in children flows only from, is contingent solely on, the mind of the pedophile, for anyone to admit that he or she has any frisson at all from looking at children is necessarily to be branded as deviant. Were society to allow itself to articulate that it does have sexual interests in children – little adults are not sexy, but innocence and purity are – society would have met the enemy and seen that he is us.

The hysteria over kiddy porn, then, is not simply the result of America's epicyclical prudishness about matters sexual. Rather it is the result of our general worries about purity, innocence, and identity – who we are. Childhood – the social concept – cannot do the moral work society has created it to do. In a century whose distinguishing marks are depression and Depression, genocide and the prospect of omnicide, life can look pretty damn nasty, brutish, and short. And so to serve both as ethical prop and security blanket, we have created a moral museum of innocence and purity – our Eden – and we have labeled it childhood. But then the paradox of everyday pedophilia is this: once we have made over childhood into purity and innocence, we naturally enough want to have it, but to have it would make it what we no longer want.

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