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What the hell is the figure of the child?

Figuring out figurality in, around, and beyond Lee Edelman

Bees are getting busier,
Birds are getting dizzier,
Little girls and boys are getting quizzier...

(Bob Haymes: "A fine spring morning", as recorded by Blossom Dearie in 1956)

On the radio

On October 30th, 2009, a colleague and I were invited to Finnish radio. We had just come out with a book, *Tapaus Neitsythuorakirkko*, and were excited to discuss our latest work in public. The book dealt with the curious case of an art installation called *Neitsythuorakirkko* ("The virgin-whore church") and an ensuing public debate that had grown into spectacular proportions in the spring of 2008. The artist, seeking to make a critical-feminist statement against the availability of "teen porn" on the Internet, was accused of, tried in court and convicted for, the possession and dissemination of child pornography. Found guilty, she became known in Fin-

land as the “child porn artist”.¹ I will not dwell on the case itself; having already written a book-length analysis on it (together with a lawyer Juulia Jyränki), I will here stay on its anecdotal outskirts.

So here we are, Juulia and I, live on a popular radio program, eager to discuss our brand-new book. And the event goes pleasantly enough, until the last few minutes, during which the tone became somber, almost aggressive, as the program’s host cleared her throat and read aloud an excerpt from the book, in a tone that seemed a mixture of severe indignation and sarcasm. The program aired live, and the host’s abrupt challenge took us by surprise: the atmosphere in the studio quickly became chilling.

The excerpt chosen to be read aloud featured a direct quote, which I had translated into Finnish from Lee Edelman’s book *No future* (2004). The original argument is by now familiar to many queer theorists, but this is how we presented it to Finnish readers of our book:

Lee Edelman has recently drawn our attention to the kind of values that are invested in the Child in contemporary culture. Our very notion of social viability, of societal wholesomeness and continuity, finds its central symbol in the untouchable Child:

the Child who might witness lewd or inappropriately intimate behavior; the Child who might find information about dangerous lifestyles on the internet; the Child who might choose a provocative book from the shelves of the public library; the Child, in short, who would find an enjoyment that would nullify the figural value, itself imposed by adult desire, of the Child as unmarked by the adult’s adulterating implication in desire itself.

Yet the Child, and not least its potential desires, finds itself beyond representation: it can only be described and understood through

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adult experience. According to Edelman, a menace of alterity drawing from adult norms – an impending gloom of queerness – continually threatens the Child, and thus the very idea of futurity, by compromising the idea of ‘innocence’ that is reflected onto the Child’s body. Thus the Child’s field of vision must be kept free from ‘obtrusions of queerness’ in order to preserve the ‘blinder as which its innocence forcibly serves, a blinder imposed on the Child with an eye toward the social control of adults’.

Paradoxically, however, the figure of the Child – the Child as object of a sublimated negation of desire – is envisioned by way of a general process of eroticization. This figuration, manifested by an anxious worry over the potential violation of the Child’s bodily integrity, manages to further entangle the Child in the logic of desire, as Edelman stresses. (Jyränki & Kalha 2009:219–220; Edelman 2004:20–21; “Learning nothing”:3–4)

I cite our book at indecent length, for I cannot remember exactly how long the host’s quote was; what I do remember is that its focus was on the Edelman reference. Beyond the usual dramaturgical effect of putting us on the spot as authors, the point of this public reading exercise was clear: to indicate to the audience how offensive our analysis was. *There IS such a thing as real children, real physical violence*, is basically what the journalist insisted; *Fuck this figuration gibberish – How can you take such a cold, indifferent view on children?*, was the gist of her outrage. Having (presumably?) read the whole book (though probably very quickly, for it had just come out), she chose not to register one of its central points, the one concerning the Child *as figure*.

Instances like this make clear that theoretical notions that for many of us make perfect, even casual sense, have to be handled with care – indeed

babied, if not spoilt – when shared with those less familiar with queer theory and cultural practices. *The Child* – mollycoddled with italics, a capitalized C, and the determinate pronoun – is not the same as a child, or the real children that populate our word. Nor is the Child simply a question of representation.² The Child *as figure* is a discursive, structural-situational entity, whose very figuration yet finds its fuel from the casualness of real situations, not unlike the one described above.

What the radio journalist did not realize is that she herself had just conjured a poignant image of the very figure whose existence she questioned. In expressing her offense, she managed, instinctively, to both materialize and dramatize the notion of the Child, precisely as figure. This figurality now manifested itself in the form of acute indignation, a sense of outrage that electrified the space of the studio – and most certainly reached the ears and hearts of those tuned in to the program. It was as though our initial excitement was now supplanted by a new, even more intense sense of (“negative”) excitement.

Indeed, as Lee Edelman reminds us (in an unpublished talk on Pedro Almodovar’s film *Bad Education*), anxiety and cathexis often go hand in hand, so that our “evocations of the Child as object of sexual prohibition” may end up reinforcing its “elaboration in a logic of desire” (“Learning nothing”, 6). Thus our sublime anxiety about the Child’s violability is part and parcel of its volatile, “erotic” nature. Alas, it is never a long way from abjection and aversion to desire. While the terminology of desire – “erotic/ization” – is here perhaps best understood by way of a metaphorical analogy that makes psychoanalytic sense, at times the figural elaboration in the logic of desire can be literal enough to enter the realm of sexuality proper (at its most simple, the “logic” in question suggests that disavowal actually breeds desire). But if nothing else, there is the desire to take offense, to get *worked up* about the Child.

In the radio studio inhumanity took on a surprising guise, if only for

a brief moment. It was now Juulia and I, the "hardened brutality" of our analysis, that came to represent the insensitive, the anti-human – that which does not take the side of the Child. And, to be sure, it was also the theorist cited, whose foreign name now stood for, not just wordy sophistry, but gross inhumanity.

Structural symptomatics

In hindsight all this makes more than perfect sense, for in the Edelmanian schema there is no Childish innocence without its situational counterpart: *sinthomosexuality*. The Child is social order's affective "face", the dominant trope of suffering and protection, whose vulnerability is played off against the anti-social otherness represented by another figural trope, that of the *sinthomosexual* (Edelman 2004: passim; 2007:475).

Although the *sinthomosexual*, as figural counterpart of the Child, is not the same as a homosexual, it is the traditional availability of gays and lesbians for vigorous othering that has inspired its investment in Edelman's structural model. The term queer, Edelman asserts, "evokes an extimate relation to the structure of normative values while affirming, through its historic association with specifically *sexual* irregularities, an indicative link to the unassimilable excess of jouissance" (Edelman 2007:473).³ Edelman has even stressed the "continuing centrality of gay sexuality to our discourses on the Child" ("Learning nothing":3) – which, for me, goes a long way to legitimize a whole issue of a journal of LGBT and queer issues devoted to those discourses.⁴

It is the polemical engagement with and investment in homosexuality that gives Edelman's antisocial polemic much of its brute force. Yet depending on the historical specificities of context, the "role" of *sinthomosexual* might just as well be recognized in a variety of very different figures. While the conservative religious right continues to rant about homosexuality, those of us who take pride in "modern" tolerance are left locating

inexcusable sexual practices elsewhere, perhaps most emphatically and topically in the figure of the pedophile.⁵ Those of us who like to feel that we live in modern, apparently open-minded, queer-friendly societies might also benefit from considering this figure as *sinthomosexual*. It should be remembered that pedophilia and homosexuality used to occupy much of the same conceptual space: from Greek *paiderastia* to more modern concerns about homosexual corruption, or "recruitment"⁶ of youth, the figures have overlapping genealogies.

Indeed, it seems that the more open-minded we become as society, *vis à vis* homosexuality – some say faggots and dykes are even fit to parent! – the more nervously curious we become about other forms of sexual transgression, particularly if there is a child present (whether it is as object or subject, viewer or viewee, doesn't seem to matter, so versatile is the Child's sensitive figurality). As the *sinthome* loosens its grip on gayness – and even some forms of queerness, as they are embraced by political correctness – it tightens its grip on other "erotic minorities" (as both pedophiles and homosexuals were termed in Swedish psychologist Lars Ullerstam's book *Erotiska minoriteteter* from 1964; see Jyränki & Kalha 2009:220–221, 302 n 402). Little wonder: we could hardly call ourselves a society if we didn't draw the line somewhere.

In any case, the structural relativity of the concepts at hand becomes both clear and ironic when we realize that while the *sinthomosexual* might typically be construed as, say, a radically queer gender-bender or a hardened bug chaser⁷, he can just as easily be a middle-class white gay man, depending on the position of "accuser" or "denouncer" (Edelman 2007:475). Thus what distinguishes the *sinthomosexual* – again, *as figure* – at the end of the day, is not what and with whom he does sexually, but a structure of alterity that links sociality with discourses of propriety/decency/social function. In this conceptual schema, *sinthomosexuality* comes to represent the fantasy of self-indulgence, dysfunctional *jouissance*, linked with the

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(imagined) privilege of remaining indifferent to the vulnerability of others, be it children, HIV-negative people, Christian believers or persons of color, or those more radically queer or less "privileged".

But in the big picture, which is what most interests Edelman, *sinthomosexuality* is the sexualized figure posited against the social order that it simultaneously subtends. Thus queerness appears in practice as a child-averse, future-negating force *in sympathy* with the "moribund familialism" that it negates (Edelman 2004:113). To put it simply – much more simply than Edelman does: the Child is that which *sinthomosexuality* threatens; *sinthomosexuality* is that which fails to baby the Child. And since the Child always already represents futurity and compulsory/compulsive reproduction, *sinthomosexuality* is doomed to figure No Future. But this negativity, thanks to its supporting role, is forever needed, if only to prop up, and sometimes upstage, its positive counterpart.

Although the figural Child is no simple matter of representation, encountering its mirage in art is always a pleasure. A nice example – almost too perfect, because so literal – of the *sinthomosexual*/Child dyad can be found in Bern, Switzerland. I am referring to the grotesque water fountain from 1545/46 known as *Kindlifresser* or "devourer of little kids". It shows a colorful, dressy character unashamedly enjoying his *sinthome* – munching on a bunch of toddlers. However we look at it, this baby-snatching banquet cannot help but ironize the reproductive imperative, while celebrating the morbid implications of the queer. Would such an artwork, one without the *Kindlifresser's* historical stature, be welcomed into public space today, I wonder? (Fig. 1)

This *Ding* from inner space (the space, that is, of societal fantasies) boasts an uncanny oral drive that, like the unbecoming *Zero* of its gaping crevice, amounts to little else than the Real-ism of "bad rearing". Taking the Child "up his (mouth)", Child-like – breeding *jouissance* through feeding on his diminutive *Kind*, the sculpture evokes a blindly throbbing,

self-destructive drive akin to what Edelman describes as “the heroic stupidity of the anus”.⁸ Indeed, depravity (or the corruption of innocence) here reads as pre-phallic: kindly receptive rather than penetrative. At the same time, the seemingly endless succession of mouthfuls seems to frame this queerest of images with a kind of temporal logic, suggesting a notion of reproduction as regurgitation – or a scenario wherein the *sinthome* subtends a perpetual circuit of futurity.



Fig. 1. Hans Gieng: Kindlifresser (1945/46), sculptural fountain at the Kornhausplatz in Bern, Switzerland.

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I called this an *almost* too perfect depiction, for the literalness is thankfully modified by confusions in both temporality and construction of meaning. This anti-futuristic fantasy reads, for us today, as an ominously "futuristic" vision: surely the *sinthomosexual*, while not belonging to any era *per se*, is as discursive presence a decidedly modern phenomenon. Yet what makes this ancient artwork "represent" *sinthomosexuality* most cunningly, is the fact that it has managed to eschew any final official agreement on what it might actually "mean"; thus, like the true *sinthome*, it plays devil with, not just representation and the Child, but allegorical closure.

While some have seen the sculpture as an out-of-place depiction of the Greek god Cronus, most are happy to note a well-meaning instance of the carnivalesque – which, like the best/worst camp, revels in representing the un-representable. Intriguingly, others have recognized in the *Kindlifresser* another classic figure of abjection, the Jew. From a queer viewpoint, whether the munchkin(d) in question represents *jouissance* or *jewissance* is somewhat beside the point, for we are in any case left with aversion and a structure of alterity – invoking the impending threat of queer *Entartung*.⁹ What is all the more delightful, is that the *Kindlifresser*, which may have been partly intended as a disciplinary example to keep disobedient children in line, is loved by children – loved, that is, before they are taught to fret and defer.

The child-like family

In early 2008, an exhibition is mounted by a Finnish contemporary artist in a small gallery in the city of Tampere. A kind of collage installed in space, the exhibition features untidy paper cut-outs, sloppy strips of tiny photographs and messy paintings – rather like a scrap book turned installation. There is a youthful sense of irreverence to the show, yet what most distinguishes it is a sense of intimacy, of emotional nakedness. A neighbor peeks in through the gallery window, and before you know it, a police investigation takes place.

As it happens, the neighbor in question, while formally representing adulthood, turns out to be another incarnation of the figural Child. What ensues is a mini case of moral panic – a simple case, yet again illustrative in its diminutive simplicity. Here the figure is activated in terms of the *lapsiperhe*, a Finnish concept referring to the nuclear family unit with young children. Literally *lapsiperhe* reads as "child-family" – suggesting that the family itself is, or stands in for, the Child. As symbolic condensation, the family-with-young is thus equal to the family-as-Child.

What was it, then, that caused "one neighbor" to suddenly inflate into a vulnerable/powerful community of Family? Well, it was a particular image that could be seen, barely just, through the gallery window: a small photograph, printed out from an Internet porn site and then completed with a pencil, depicting a penis. As was quickly verified by the police investigation, half an erect cock could be discerned amidst the busy cut and paste job. Thanks to this particular police officer's presence of mind, the exhibition was not closed down, nor was the artwork confiscated; instead the artist was kindly asked to remove the dubious image – after all, local specimens of the Childish family were apt to confront it.

Ironically enough, the partial photograph was pasted onto a panel with pedagogical illustrations depicting "the male reproductive system". Thus what the Family had peeped at through the gallery window was a laconic mirror of sorts: the *sine qua non* of all nuclear families, a most basic illustration of reproductive futurism. (Fig. 2)

True, the image was troubled by pornographic intrusion: thanks to the marvels of collage, this wasn't pedagogy proper, but rather "bad education", infused with a healthy dose of queer irony. We might say that the speed-reading affected by the Child-like family was actually spot-on. The image was none other than a crude refiguring of the tenet of "copulonormativity": a queer boner spilling onto the pedagogical nature / natural pedagogy of the original illustrations.

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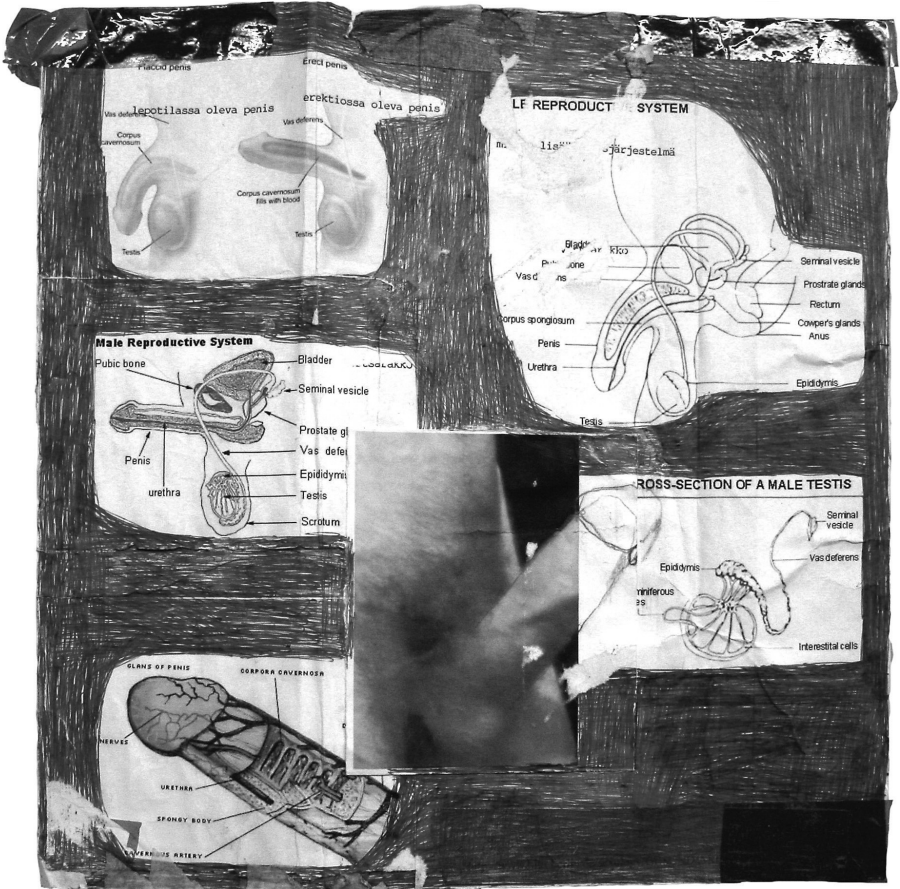


Fig. 2. Reima Hirvonen: installation seen through gallery window and untitled collage (part of installation), Rajatila Gallery, Tampere 2008.

This said, I don't think such a "subversive statement" was really intended by the artist, not in so many words, anyway. I rather think he was intrigued by the graphic educational erection, and decided to accentuate it with the messy realism of pornographic representation. This was, at bottom, *homage to cock* – not that such an homage would have been any easier to fathom by the Child/Family. In any case, the work was hardly intended as an affront against the family, least of all against any child.

Likewise, it was the sloppy confusion of art and life that triggered the familial abjection, rather than any "politically reflective" reading of the installation. The artist had pimped up (actually, down) the gallery space in a manner that disturbed its consumption as "fine art", and this muddiness, disturbing the aesthetic sense of an adult passer-by, found convenient forensic evidence in the cock, which thus became an easy scapegoat for the figural abjection. Hence the Child is invoked as potential viewer, with the fatal meeting of Penis and Child being *fantasized* by the adult viewer. Adult confusion is thus displaced onto – or exorcized through? – the idea of children's corruption.

I was happy to write the accompanying essay for a recent book presenting the art/ist in question (Kalha 2010:186–199). However, when the book went to press, something extraordinary occurred. After a trial printing of five books was made, the product caught the eye of the director of the printing firm, and the presses were abruptly stopped. *This is not art*, was the verdict, and after all, the contract had concerned printing an art book. Apparently the director, who had bothered to check neither manuscript nor lay outs, now felt it his duty to function as both critic and judge: to unmask this obscenity parading as art. To be sure, it was the "bad education" of queerness that sparked off the inspired overreaction. The restless realism of the book – showing desire in all its awkwardness, and masculinity at its most Real – ceased to read as an artistic statement, and instead became a gross marker of *sinthomosexuality*

While there were no actual children, figural or otherwise, involved at this stage, the notion of societal decency invoked by the printer rests on related ideas of responsibility, propriety and protection. *This is not art* was just another way of saying *This is obscene* – this so called book is not fit for us to print. A book, alas, is always already about potential education, futuristic accountability.¹⁰

It took an emphatic petition signed by ten Finnish authorities from both Museums and Academia to finally convince the printer that the artist in question is indeed a legitimate representative of Finnish contemporary art. By this time the artist, frustrated and anguished, had withdrawn the book. Now, over half a year after presses were abruptly stopped, the book has finally come out. A Happy Ending?

The child on-scene

When we shield our children from "harmful" images or "wicked" knowledge; when we go so far as preventing any bad education from potentially occurring, what are we actually doing? Who are we protecting and from what? Are we really just safeguarding ourselves, managing our safety zones – our social order? Why are we so troubled by the Child, particularly its field of vision? Is it because the culture of visuality that we have created disturbs *us*, and we reflect a nostalgic, melancholic sense of innocence onto the not yet corrupted? (Cf. Kalha 2007b:42–48; Jyränki & Kalha 2009:224)

Of course, those of us most vocally concerned about the corruption of children – be it by *risqué* reflections in "fine" art or by suggestive aspects of popular/commercial visual culture – are usually not very interested in probing such questions: the Child, for those of us, *must remain* a figure. Hence even critical analyses can be imagined as a threat, if their criticism is not of the pedagogically correct, soothing kind.

While it does indeed look as if there is an increasing readiness to "deal"

with queerness, this readiness is often frustrated by a more immediate, sentimental reaction that seeks cathartic solace in a sexualizing speed-reading. In our current state of readiness to confront the *sinthome*, we seem to desire, not so much to "know" it, but to be scandalized by it. Accordingly, the cultural presence of, say, pedophilia, is largely a media presence, no less sentimentalizingly mythological, then, than the figure of the Child.

This might go some way in explaining why even the "socially progressive" societies that make up our Nordic community continue to be riddled by a symptomatic of disavowal, of which this article offers some of its least dramatic, least violent examples. While explicit instances of homophobic violence – or outright public scandals linking children with sexuality – would provide juicier cases, it is equally important to note how structures of othering work in more subtle cultural-intellectual contexts which would otherwise never subscribe to the vulgarity of intolerance or moral panicking.

Seen from this perspective, the Child offers a legitimized arena for moralizing abjection. Because we prefer to be on the safe side, to leave the figure untouched – both intellectually and corporeally – it remains a vague, restless mirage, haunted by ambivalence and suggestion. In such cases, it is not so much that we refuse to recognize or reconcile with fantasy (as representation theorists might argue), but that we fail to see beyond fantasy: it is actually our own fantasy that we deem disturbing or out of place. Encountering artworks such as those presented here may thus prove a worthy exercise, even if it entails familiarizing ourselves with unknowability.

In the cases recounted here, one also detects an effect of scapegoating. We cannot grab hold of true evil, so we turn to that which is closest at hand: artists who deal with sexual matters, scholars/writers who stand in for the *sinthome*, images that engender willful fantasy, books that stand in for adulteration. The place of the *sinthomosexual* is open game for societal figuration.

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The practical point, beyond acknowledging that there really is no simple way to read culture, is to ask: would artworks like the ones presented here really be harmful to children? Would, say the hurly-burly of the spatial scrapbook in the Tampere gallery really have offended a child's mind? What would such "offense" actually entail? As far as I know, children are quite adept at confronting things, even of the messiest kind, that they don't quite understand. Images or things that are "troubling" enough (for us adults) to become true artworks, are not necessarily a problem for kids. Decency is an adult prerogative, as is "being in the know".

In terms of the representation of children/childhood, the Child's electrifying figurality entails, paradoxically, that we have become, as a culture, sensitized to the uncanny "sexiness" of minors. The cute toddler in a Pampers commercial *will* now attract our attention; we *will* make note of its "nudity" – once part and parcel of its cuteness, this nakedness now reads as utterly dubious. We *will* now note how the camera "makes love" to those plump little buttocks. Visual sensitization/electrification/vulgarization around the Child in fact turns us all into potential pedophiles, at least in terms of "dirtiness of mind" and bad conscience (Kincaid 1998; Mohr 2004:17–30).¹¹

It is, alas, a very thin line between sensitization and eroticization: acute awareness easily morphs into wariness, doubt and disavowal. This also means that the little boy in a Calvin Klein ad will be fantasized – by way of analogical speed-reading – as a mini Mark Wahlberg, as the conceptual distance from "huggies" to "hung" becomes mind-bogglingly short (see Annamari Vänskä in this volume). It is our paranoid adult consciousness that insists on adulterating the child: sensitized as we have become to the modern tropes of desire – desire visualized, theorized and politicized – an erotics of aversion overrules sensitivity. We might understand this fantasmatic "pedophilization" of everyman to be part and parcel of what Edelman (2004:75, 151) calls the "fascism of the baby's face".

What, structurally speaking, is the innocence we so revere, and in so doing, fetishize? As Edelman suggests (pace Rousseau and Derrida), the very concept of innocence *requires* the negativity of evil, of tarnish or de-se-cration: innocence thus in fact occasions its own perversion (“Learning nothing”, 7). Edelman stresses the ironic linkage between innocence and ignorance: “No wonder the Child should provoke the desire to protect it against the knowledge of and at its very origin. Naming as ‘innocence’ the Child’s luxurious immersion in non-knowing denies our own knowledge that the Child confirms the deficiency in Nature [...]” (ibid:8).

From deficiency to decency

À propos perversion and innocence, I would like to offer a final example of representing *jouissance* in art – a historical work that suggests a more compelling stance *vis à vis* the figural Child than what we are used to today: the *Brunnenbubel* (1895) in München. Here, again, is a suggestion of endearment (*Bubel*, like *Kindl*, is an idiomatic diminutive); here, too, a mature, shady figure to contrast with the Child’s bare innocence; here, too, a sparkling water fountain (fig. 3).¹²

It would be easy to make sense of this work as simply an instance of folksy humor. The mature figure is but a figure – a bust, in the ancient tradition of those joyously phallic busts depicting satyrs – but as such, it stands for combustion, indulgence and *jouissance*. Satyrs, after all, were the *other* in classical aesthetics. An instance of allegorized *sinthomosexuality*, we might call them: wild and cocky, intermediate beings, prancing about in a perpetual state of sexual heat (hence we have *satyriasis*: a venereal disease of sorts, kin to our modern notion of sexual addiction). To add insult to injury, the elderly satyr sports a cornucopia-like garland, as support for his poignant (water) pipe.

As it happens, the *Brunnenbubel* was met with accusations of *Unsittlichkeit* (“indecenty”) that quickly turned into a crusade of moral activism:

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scandalized citizens of Munich started sending the sculptor bathing suits in order to cover up the boy's private parts (the artist is said to have received over 300 pieces!).¹³ But this focus on a missing garment may be little more than a tautological cover-up. It was hardly nudity *an sich* that caused the friction; rather it was the asymmetric coupling of the Child with luxurious *jouissance* – as well as allegorical ambivalence, for "interpreting" this image is no child's game. The boy presses his hand against the water pipe – but does he want to have a golden shower/drink, or is he fighting the impulse – who can tell? If the allegory spells "curiosity killed the cat", the treatment is all too queerly ironic for its own good. Is the satyr teasing the child to en- or discourage him? Is it a cleansing shower, or a debasing one? Is it, in fact, a caricature of our moral attitudes, of our pederastic sensitivity to "bad education"?

The figure of the Child – in the structural sense that we are dealing with here – is not concerned with such reading options. The sense of indignation brought about by violations of the Child's imagistic innocence is not all about irrational disavowal, however. It entails a dynamic of negative-to-positive affectivity (as suggested by the swimwear activism of Munich's good citizens *anno* 1895): something other is negated in order to evoke a positive sense of community and social cohesion – "We are revolted by it/them". Moral reactions from indignation to revulsion harbor positive affects: *I'm shocked!* thus often times actually means *It sure feels good to feel so bad about that (especially since you feel bad about it too)*.

Impressions of "decency" are always already about community. And nothing seems to nurture/exploit that sense of societal cohesion more thoroughly than the community we feel through our children. The Child, spoilt by attention, becomes a weapon in the deployment of moral self-worth, which easily morphs from righteousness into a dialect of hate speak: with the help of the Child, the vague and dated line of moral indignation is drawn firmly into today's world, and on to tomorrow.



Fig. 3. Matthias Gasteiger: Brunnenbuberl (1895), München, Germany.

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Indeed, in the anecdotal cases recounted above, the figural Child comes armed with a discursive repertoire that is particularly resonant in Northern Europe. The tenacity of this historical line – from early 20th Century *Sittlichkeit/sedlighet/siveellisyyt*s to the figural/on-scene Child of the 21st Century – is also indicated by public pronouncements made by Finland’s ”Ethical Council on Advertising” (*Mainonnan eettinen neuvosto*), which issues public statements on topical advertisements. As complaints concerning ”gender inequality” (as in, say, ”sexist” lingerie ads) have lessened dramatically in recent years, complaints about ”unsuitability for children” have increased (Kallio 5.3.2010). In its statements, the Ethical Council on Advertising speaks, rather awkwardly, of *hyvä tapa*, which reads something like ”normative convention in matters of decency”. This pseudo-judicial term is taken for granted, although it is far from clear what such a standard might actually mean in contemporary society. In any case, of the ten Finnish advertisements from 2009 that were deemed against *hyvä tapa*, all of eight were found so because ”ill-fitting for children”. What it is exactly about the advertisements, products advertised, or visual strategies applied that is considered unsuitable, remains unclear.

While such vague notions could easily be dismissed as conservative moralizing, they still seem to make some kind of general sense when attached to the figure of the Child. Just like the ideologically-laden term ”decency” in its early 20th century usage, our current idea of ”unsuitability for children” is truistically charged and mythological, which also means that it is rather immune to critical analysis. The vulnerability of the Child is mythological in the Barthesian sense: not, then, in the sense of being untrue, but rather due to the ”goes without saying” nature that its sentimental circulation thrives on (Barthes 1952/1972:passim). So the slippery, sexualized notion of decency has, in northern Europe, come to hover around the figure of the Child: while modernity reigns, decency remains, with the Child as its last/new (newly electrified) fortress.

Around 1900, the idea of corruption of children, or "bad education", surfaced occasionally, but at least in Finland there seems to have been much more worry over the corruption of virtues of the common man – not to mention the virtuous woman.¹⁴ European popular visual culture was full of "eroticizing" (cute?) depictions of children that we today would find dubious, if not startling, yet it is quite rare that nudity in children (favored in sculpture, painting and popular postcards) was given critical notice. This might, in fact, support my thesis that nudity *per se* was not the issue in the case of the *Brunnenbuberl*, but that it rather functioned as a convenient scapegoat, with the "fig leaf crusade" providing a kind of collective exorcism. It remains safe to say that the Child makes a discursive entrance with the *Brunnenbuberl*: thanks to the symbolic presence of *jouissance*, the Child is given an "eroticizing" platform, to enable utterances, even "Socratic" overtones, that later development would deem out of line.

While I have chosen here to look at these cases structurally rather than historically, one route for explaining historical change might open up from analyzing, as suggested above, the conceptual sphere of Germanic-northern-European "decency" with its increasing sexual-moralizing function in the course of the 20th century. At the same time, one should consider how more recent cultural developments have rendered the "intimate sphere" an increasingly public issue – surely this is one reason why instances of collective indignation make us feel so good today (cf. Berlant 1997:passim.; Jyränki & Kalha 2009:204).

Another, more concrete factor has been the increasing sensitivity to representation and sexuality advocated by psychoanalysis, feminism and gender consciousness. Surely images are being "read" like never before, but as indicated above, such reading usually amounts to little more than an allegorical quick fix. While "vulgar feminist" stances are now frowned upon, vulgar child protection is still a valid "critical" stance. On the other hand, relative tolerance *vis à vis* some deviants (say, gays, lesbians and

transsexuals) may be predicated on an insistent othering of other others (say, child molesters).

We seem to be running out of objects fit for panicky protection. Children (and animals) are an ideally mute object of patronage – like the ventriloquist’s doll. Real children will quickly tune into the melodrama of our horror and distaste. And pedophiles provide an ideal exercise in abjection, for it is just as easy – as “natural” – to be grossed out by pedophilia as it is to accept the modern, sociable forms of homosexuality.

Against children?

The decent, (on-)scenic, highly-strung Child sketched out by critics like Lee Edelman, drawing from more empirically inclined cultural historians such as James Kincaid (1992; 1998), may be a conceptual/ideological abstraction, but as I have hoped to show in this article, it has the very concrete power to take us – our artworks, our cultural expressions – hostage. I have tried to suggest that Edelman’s polemic provides a highly relevant, even (ironically) “fruitful” companion for analyzing cultural phenomena.

If children are indeed becoming an endangered species, this endangerment may have less to do with increased physical threat than with the figural fragility of the Child as concept – something that articulations like this present issue of *lambda nordica* are likely to attest to. Yet, as frail as the figure of the Child may seem to some of us, the more powerful will its discursive appeal be to many others, for it is on this balancing act that so much of humanity, as we know it, rests.

Surely no one in their right mind can be “against children”, and I consider myself no exception – however much I prefer to fantasize about getting a gay little puppy over conceiving a human child. Neither is this article to say that real children shouldn’t be protected from potential harm. *I am not talking about physical violence, but discourses, symbolic structures and cultural dynamics.* I repeat this laconic statement knowing that this very declaration will itself

be a source of irritation. For it is here that most people flinch. *Sure, theorize all you want – if you wish to come across as a heartless cynical asshole.*

Make no mistake about it: I *should* be talking about real violence, and not discourses or structures. Here we have one of very few instances where theoretical analysis or cultural critique is still expected if not obliged to be compassionate – explicitly and emphatically so – rather than poignant, compelling, provocative, or simply matter-of-factly analytical (as I have tried to be). Butt-bare analysis *will* come across as anti-social – not unlike writerly *jouissance*, for they both bend over backwards for nothing.

As Edelman notes, an insistent ethical absolutism prescribes humanity as a "principle of closure" not open to reflection (cf. "Learning nothing": 11). Thus the most hard-core critic must make it a point to tend to the Child, must take it at face value, so as not to be/appear heartless, less than human. It is this functional "decency" – entangled in a thorny bunch of truistical deadlocks – that should continue to inspire those of us who already carry the burden of queerness to take the Child to task – to deconstruct the discursive tensions it's figure so neatly subtends.

This does not mean that we should stop forming families and making babies, if that is what makes us happy. Still, I must maintain that the figure of the Child can never be queer – nor is there such a thing, structurally speaking, as "queer family". "Real" childhood, on the other hand (for all we know), is always already queer (Bruhm & Hurley 2004). Alas, the term "queer child" is a redundancy, while "queer Child" is doomed to the status of oxymoron. And if this ending sounds busy – as a bee, even – feel free to think of it in terms of a dizzy, quizzical anti-reproductive busyness, one that rebels against *hyvä tapa*, narrative structure, and principles of closure.

Key words: the Child, sinthomosexuality, *jouissance*, antisocial theory, structuralism, art and obscenity, decency, *sedlighet*, *Sittlichkeit*, *siveellisyyt*, *Brunnenbuberl*, *Kindlifresser*.

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NOTES

1 For an analysis of the intricacies, both artistic and juridical, of the case, see Jyränki & Kalha 2009. Suffice to recount here that the installation was taken apart and confiscated within a couple of hours of its first day of exhibition: the most short-lived artwork ever in Finnish history, the "Virgin-Whore Church" yet became one of its most widely debated ones, not least because of the electrifying implication of the figure of the Child. The guilty verdict, verified by the Court of Appeal, relied largely on the idea of respecting the "privacy" i.e. intimacy of the innocent children (young models, some of them rather famous porn stars, such as "Teen Topanga", who was 26 around the time of the case), whose pictures the artist had downloaded from easily accessible porn sites.

2 As I see it, figurality was taken by the journalist to be a simple synonym for representation. For example: if a 20-something porn star sports braids, braces and a cheer-leader outfit while licking on a lollipop, she is only an image of a child, hence figural – this would thus be a "figure" of childhood. Dealing as our book did with a conceptual appropriation of actual pornography, it was easy for figuration to conflate with representation. Yet in this particular case, the figure of the Child materialized most compellingly, not in the artwork itself, but in

the discourse that came to surround, surpass and silence the artwork.

3 Thus queer can equal *sinthomosexual*, especially if queer is understood in the post- or anti-identitarian sense, which flirts with the literal/traditional meanings of the word (*adj.* deviating from the normal, eccentric; *v.* to ruin or thwart). What for me legitimizes the tangled term *sinthomosexual*, is the very awkwardness of its etymological resonance. The *sinthome* refers, homophonically, to both ‘symptom’ and ‘holy man’ (*saint homme*). While the term thus alludes, ambivalently, to Lacan and the *sinthome*, it also suggests the pairing of homosexuality with sin, and through these allusions it manages to complicate terminological identity

4 While touching up this article, I was struck by a piece in Finland’s leading daily, *Helsingin Sanomat* (23.1.2011), which manages to bring home Edelman’s point. The title reads “Minors must be protected from culture that harbors [gay] pornography”, and it focuses on a present retrospective of Tom of Finland’s work. The authors, hailing an opportunity for children to mature into a “healthy sexuality” without harmful influences, voice their concern that gay porn is now being served underhandedly to children, under the civilized guise of culture. Without entertaining the tired *art vs. pornography* debate, one might ask whether Tom of Finland’s markedly *gay* fantasies wouldn’t be among the best possible bad education available for children today.

5 For work in progress tackling the figure of the pedophile in the Finnish context, see Sorainen 2007a & b.

6 Consider Finland’s so called *kehoituspykälä*, an obstinate legal statute that did not criminalize gay sex per se, but the act of *kehoitus*, i.e. suggesting or inviting someone to have gay sex. This idea of sexual “recommendation” has long governed straight gay fantasizing. The awkward term is intriguing inasmuch as it underscores the paradoxical linkage between queerness and education. Ironically, it also seems to suggest that straight decency would prefer a blissful yielding to the queer drive to any form of social contact. The main goals of gay activism in Finland included the abolishment of the statute, which finally did

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take place – as late as 1999.

7 See Dean's *Unlimited intimacy* (2009) and Edelman's "Undoing: pornography and the queer event" for similar, but theoretically conflicting readings of bare-backing porn. As the titles indicate, Dean's empathetic-anthropological analysis stresses fantasies of community and intimacy while Edelman underscores the radical performance of *jouissance* as an event of the "posthumanous" – the queer event that yet remains impossible.

8 The Lacanian echoes of my discourse (*das Ding*, the Real etc.) here owe much to Edelman's essay on *Bad education*, where he underscores the symbolic role of the zero as a stand-in for *jouissance*; as for the idea of the "stupidity" of the drive, it draws from Edelman's thoughts on pornography presented in an essay entitled "Unbecoming: pornography and the queer event".

9 As the German term for "degeneration", *Entartung* suggests the undoing of a "kind", or species (cf. Kalha 2005:267–271). As for Jewish connotations, the figure is wearing a pointed hat that was originally yellow in accordance with Jewish custom (Schenk 1945). This interpretation has not been very popular in the post-war context. Relevant here is the insistent coupling of the sinthomatic *Unheimliche* with "unhomey" alterity, and the subsequent need to exorcise evil associations such as anti-semitism. Thus a website presenting the city of Bern typically states that the work is "certainly no child-murdering Jew" (http://www.g26.ch/bern_brunnen_16.html). As for the term *jewissance*, I borrow it with gratitude from Joseph Litvak who borrows it from Daniel Boyarin.

10 Cf. Edelman's reading of *Hamlet*: "the child as biological survivor (*fortleben*) requires an educational supplement to make its survival equivalent to a book (*überleben*)" What intrigues me is the idea of a book as a conceptual extension of the figural Child. As Edelman reminds us, aesthetics, education, sublimation – all these terms unavoidably reinforce the social imperative ("Learning nothing": 10, 13).

11 The main impetus for our cultural expressions of decent abjection/protection may in fact be "bad conscience": an increasing sense of guilt, which some have

come to call the affect of the new millennium. Ironically, it well may be that queers, already invested in torrid traditions of *shame*, are less prone to such a symptomatic of bad conscience.

12 Water fountains traditionally symbolize fertility and new life, but also playful *jouissance*, which makes them prone to dubiety.

13 Briefs or no briefs, indignation has x-ray vision. This is a time when, not far from Munich, Freud was elaborating his ideas on the seduction of children, which matured into a theory between 1893 and 1897 (see Vänskä in this volume for how the theory evolved and became established as run-of-the-mill freudianism). It is possible that Freud and the *Brunnenbuberl* were both children of modernity's growing passion with youth and sexuality – certainly the latter's iconography translates quite easily into an uneasy scene of *Verführung* (seduction, or literally, "guiding astray").

14 The Child of today thus compares with the Woman of yesteryear – that figure of docile decency that decorated early 20th century debates on public decency. One hundred years ago it was largely women that both spoke against, and were safeguarded from, obscenity. (E.g. Kalha 2008:180). Children were largely ignored, because they were imagined virtually virtuous – in spite of novel theorizations, in themselves scandalously seductive, by Freud (cf. note 18). See Kincaid 1992 for an account of "eroticism" around the Victorian child.

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ABSTRACT

The article takes on Lee Edelman's controversial book *No future* (2004) as well as a number of his lesser known articles to see how "fruitful" an analytical companion the so called *antisocial theory* might be for analyzing discourses and cultural images. While many queer theorists emphasize Edelman's polemic call for queers to embrace the death drive and thus accede to the position that culture symbolically gives him/her, this article focuses on the underlying structural analysis and its key concepts: the Child, *jouissance* and *sinthomosexuality*.

Presenting a variety of cases concerning cultural discourses and art practices, as well as societal reactions thereto, the article shows how panicky attitudes and speed-reading tendencies work to mystify the very images and practices that they claim to tackle or critique. Our sublime anxiety about the Child's violability is part and parcel of its volatile, "eroticized" nature; if nothing else, there is an emphatic desire to take offense, to get worked up about the Child.

The article opens with a brief account concerning the reception of the author's

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latest book in Finland. Using the anecdote to introduce the theoretical concepts at hand, the article goes on to argue how a resistance to the idea of “figurality”, coupled with an obstinate tendency to literalize the Child into a notion of real children, continues to hamper analyses and sentimentalize attitudes. In the process, the Child’s figural counterpart is invoked: the image of *sinthomosexuality*, that which fails to side up with the Child and with the future that Child subtends, tending instead to *jouissance*. This symbol of transgression and excess can take a variety of guises from of “anti-social” sexual practices to writing style to cold theorizing.

Queerness makes its appearance as a future-negating, anti-humane or dysfunctional force, which is, paradoxically, *in sympathy* with the familialism or societal function that it negates. Since the Child always already represents futurity and compulsory/compulsive reproduction, sinthomosexuality is doomed to figure No Future. But this symbolic negativity, thanks to its supporting role, is forever needed, if only to prop up its positive counterpart.

To see how *jouissance* and the Child have been coupled in historical cultural expressions, the article discusses two public artworks, *Kindlifresser* from 1545 and *Brunnenbuberl* from 1895. While history has modified the shock value of these artworks with an aura of tradition and respectability, they illustrate how cunningly and ambivalently – in a word, queerly – art has been able to deal with issues that seem grossly (in)sensitive today.

Another, more recent anecdotal account shows how the figure of the Child was evoked in the communal reactions around an installation by the Finnish artist Reima Hirvonen. A handful of local “families-with-young” – yet another materialization of the needy Child – took measures against what they considered an indecent exposure, and a police investigation ensued. The artist had to remove a collage featuring a small paper cutout that depicted (half) an erect penis. Later, a book presenting the artist’s work met with similar resistance, and would have gone unpublished if it hadn’t been for a petition signed by several Finnish contemporary art experts. Art was thus brought to bear the shadow of

sinthomosexuality, indicating once again the power with which the figure of the Child can hold our cultural expressions hostage.

Finally the article takes a brief look at recent utterings by the Finnish Council of Advertising (*Mainonnan eettinen neuvosto*) to see how concerns about “decency” (an awkwardly expressed “good manner”, *hyvä tapa*, harking back at historical discourses on *Sittlichkeit/Sedlighet*) are focused increasingly on the Child.

Bringing together all these cases, in themselves both historically and conceptually distinct, with Lee Edelman’s theorizations, the article offers a “functional” reading of antisocial theory that underscores the structural-situational and discursive backbone of this particular brand of queer theory. In so doing the article highlights the continuing relevance of queer thought.

Key words: the Child, *sinthomosexuality*, *jouissance*, antisocial theory, structuralism, art and obscenity, decency, *sedlighet*, *Sittlichkeit*, *siveellisyy*s, *Brunnenbuberl*, *Kindlifresser*.