

STEVEN ANGELIDES

## What's behind child sex panics?

The Bill Henson scandal

... perhaps we stay focused on safeguarding children because we fear them. Perhaps we are threatened by the specter of their longings that are maddeningly, palpably opaque.

*Kathryn Bond Stockton (2008:126)*

**ON 22 MAY 2008**, journalist Miranda Devine published what was to be a catalytic opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In it she railed against the sexualization of children in the media. Devine began by announcing the opening, that evening, of the exhibition of Australian photographer Bill Henson. This particular exhibition caught the attention of Devine and other critics after the circulation amongst journalists of invitations for the opening night. These featured a single image from the exhibit of a naked 13-year-old girl with budding breasts and hands covering her pudenda.<sup>2</sup> For Devine, the photograph is exemplary of the abhorrent depths of a culture out of control in its sexualization of children.

The time was ripe for controversy. Widespread concern over the issue of child sexualization has been steadily growing in Europe, North America and Australia. An Australian Federal Parliament Senate inquiry into the sexualization of children in the media was due to report its findings the month following the Henson exhibition.<sup>3</sup> In a matter of hours after Devine's article was released, the Henson exhibition was being debated on radio talk shows, the views of politicians were being canvassed, journalists and television news crews were in pursuit of the gallery, and complaints were being made to the NSW State police. Abusive phone calls began flooding in to the gallery. "You're all pornographers"; "We know where you are"; "We're going to burn the gallery down" (Marr 2008:17) By late afternoon the police had been called in to investigate both the fracas enveloping the gallery and the exhibition itself. After their inspection the police Superintendent requested that the Oxley's "suspend the exhibition 'to allow inquiries of legality of photos'" (Qtd. in Marr 2008:21). Henson and the Oxley's agreed.<sup>4</sup>

The following day the media and political heavyweights entered the fray. NSW State Opposition Leader declared that the "sexualisation of children under the guise of art is totally unacceptable." Hetty Johnson, one of the most high profile Australian child protection advocates, was calling for Henson's arrest. "The police should prosecute and the last time I checked it was a crime to photograph children sexually...There is a classification of porn and this falls under it" (qtd in Masters & Valleyo 2008:4). NSW State Premier Morris Iemma, who at the time was travelling on government business in China, was quick to prepare a statement for the media: "As a father of four I find it offensive and disgusting...I don't understand why parents would agree to allow their kids to be photographed like this" (qtd in Masters & Valleyo 2008:4). Then came the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's now legendary "gut reaction". Rudd was appearing on Channel Nine's Today show the morning after the opening had been shut down. He had not yet seen any of the controversial photos. Today's

presenter displayed in quick slideshow succession five images of the girl identified only as 'N,' whose nude image graced the front cover of the exhibition invitation. Black bars veiled N's nipples and genital area, and below the slideshow was a news subtitle reading "Outrage over child-porn art." Asked about what he thought of the images, Rudd said immediately, "I find them absolutely revolting. Kids deserve to have the innocence of their childhood protected...for God's sake, let's just allow kids to be kids" (qtd in Margetts 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Several hours after Rudd's television appearance about twenty police, armed with a warrant, seized up to 21 of the Henson photographs. Alan Sicard of the NSW Police announced in a statement to the media that it "is likely that we will proceed to prosecution on the offence of publishing an indecent article under the Crimes Act" (qtd in Margetts 2008).

So began what journalist David Marr (2008:59) describes in his book on the case as "the biggest story in the country" that year. Nothing short of a media feeding frenzy ensued. Literally hundreds and hundreds of reports of the unfolding scandal were to be aired and published in Australia, and around the world, in the weeks and months that followed.

Psychoanalytic theorist Tim Dean (2000:159) suggests that a "topic's volatility indicates its proximity to something [socio-]psychically fundamental, something that gets to the heart of the matter"<sup>6</sup> The volatility of the Henson scandal was *ostensibly* about the sexualization and exploitation of children. This article is about what has been obscured in the way this scandal has unfolded and been given meaning. My hypothesis is that what has been obscured is central to the subject's volatility, and that this sex panic might have something to teach us about Western child sex panics generally.

### **Shame, shame, shame**

"It's a tabloid page one of genius," declares Marr, "the heavy-set coppers heading up the stairs; N's fragile face turned away in shame." Marr is here

describing the front page *Daily Telegraph* image of the police raid of the Henson exhibition. Evocative of childhood vulnerability, the image of N's self-conscious pose was bound to inflame passions, Marr is suggesting. Inflame it did. Polemical journalist Andrew Bolt (2008:18) excoriated the art world, claiming shame "is dead in the arts." Only shamelessness persists, he said. "Henson should have been made long ago to feel too ashamed to show his face, let alone his pictures" Hetty Johnson was equally enraged. "We are just handing our children on a bloody plate to paedophiles," she spat. "This is a disgrace for this country, absolutely shameful" (qtd in Marr 2008:127). The distribution of the image on the Internet was itself enough, many argued, to encourage and normalize pedophilia, and thus lead to abuse of children. Clive Hamilton, former Australia Institute Executive Director and sponsor of the *Corporate Paedophilia* and *Let Children be Children* reports that helped to galvanize the anti-sexualization-in-the-media movement, also echoed this fear of pedophilic desire, albeit in a somewhat more measured tone. Hamilton (2008) hit a notion of caution: "[T]hat paedophiles not only find stimulation in media images of eroticised children but take them as justification for their predatory urges, inescapably casts a darkness over the Henson photographs."<sup>7</sup>

Inciting the desire of pedophiles was far from the only problem. For one thing, the extent to which the images themselves sexualized this so-called innocence of childhood was at the centre of the issue of legality. Police were investigating the possibility of the images breaching child pornography and indecency laws, as Hetty Johnston had been arguing.<sup>8</sup> After their investigations and in spite of Johnson's protestations, however, the NSW police ultimately decided not to lay charges against Henson or the gallery. This came as a result of advice from the Department of Public Prosecutions and the national Classification Board. The Board concluded that the image in question "is mild and justified by context...and is not sexualised to any degree" (qtd in Iggulden 2008).<sup>9</sup>

Even some of those that argued the images should be censored—with the exception of Hetty Johnson—were not necessarily willing to claim that an image of an adolescent nude is automatically a sexual image. This was the DPP's view. It was also Clive Hamilton's. "Although not s[e]xual images, they can be seen," he wrote, "as a commentary on the slow, halting and unsettling metamorphosis of child's body into an adult one" (Hamilton 2009). However, it was precisely on this point of depicting the supposedly "unsettling metamorphosis" of the adolescent body that struck such a resounding emotional chord with the public. This was, of course, just what Henson was seeking to capture. Asked why nude young people are a theme in his work, he replied that they are "the most effective vehicle for expressing ideas about humanity and vulnerability" (qtd in Tovey & Hawker 2008).

Henson's comments only fuelled the ire of his opponents, whose claims about child exploitation were themselves based squarely on notions of the vulnerability of children. Even so-called normal adults were presumed to be complicit unwittingly, it seems, in exploiting and harming vulnerable children merely by viewing the images. "Teenage children are developmentally fragile," argued psychologist Steve Biddulph. "They try on any number of selves, and have to be free to do so, without adult predation on their bodies and minds. What might seem cool and exciting one day to a teenager, they would regard with horror and embarrassment on another day and at another time" (Biddulph 2008:13). The standard refrain of anti-Henson and child protectionist commentary is that the naked models have had their privacy taken from them, and thus also, according to this argument, their innocence. Said NSW opposition leader, "it is definitely not OK for naked children to have their privacy and their childhood stolen in the name of art" (qtd in Masters and Vallejo 2008). Joanne McCarthy of *The Newcastle Herald* also raised the issue of privacy. "This debate shouldn't be about art alone but about the rights of children to be children, in priva-

te, in the buff sometimes as so many of them choose, doing inappropriate things, but safe and respected” (McCarthy 2008:9).<sup>10</sup>

Concerns about vulnerability and privacy were less about images of child nudes per se, than about the adult gaze—paedophilic or otherwise—witnessing the exposure of the child nude. A principal worry is that the repeated circulation and public display of the images might come back to bite unsuspecting and unaware children, resulting in future embarrassment, shame, and trauma. The presumption being made is that N is not of sufficient emotional and intellectual capacity yet to appreciate the fact that she has participated in an inappropriate form of social self-revelation that some day she might come to regret. N is assumed to have acted, in other words, as any innocent child might, *without* sufficient adult capacity for shame when it comes to public nudity. Not unlike a child parading with her clothes off on her family’s home movies, she has innocently and *shamelessly* bared all in front of a much more invasive camera—or so the logic of some of these claims would suggest.

Other commentators, notably pro-Henson, worried that the fracas over whether the images are art or pornography might itself inadvertently shame the nude body of N, and other young bodies by association. Melbourne ethicist Leslie Cannold asked rhetorically: “Can we allow adolescents to feel proud of their bodies and sexuality, or will we—by condemning as pornographic the photographing of such bodies—forever insist on shame?” (Cannold 2008). *Herald Sun’s* Andrea Burns agreed. “There is plenty of time to feel ashamed of the human body in adulthood. Telling these children that their forms are offensive, dangerous and fodder for pedophiles is the sickness” (Burns 2008:107). Some attempted to counter this implicit shaming of children’s bodies by situating Henson’s work within a tradition of Western religious art history known for its nude images of children. “What, then, does Rudd make of the portraits of naked children created in the name of the Christian faith he espouses?” asked Christopher Kremmer

(2008:11) rhetorically. Drawing from Leo Steinberg's book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, Kremmer highlights the historical association in Christianity of shame and nakedness via the story of Adam and Eve. He then makes an implicit comparison with the image of N. "We may say that Michelangelo's naked Christ...[is] like the naked Christ child, not shameful, but literally and profoundly shameless" (2008:11). Many agreed with this interpretation of Henson's main image as a representation of childhood innocence and vulnerability.<sup>11</sup>

Just days after the story broke of the police seizure of Henson's works, a piece on the Australian website of news NewMatilda.com also broached the issue of shame. It was entitled "On Purity and Shame" (2008) and it was written anonymously by a man who declared that as a 14-year-old boy he had been abused by a male doctor. It was written as a response to the tactics and arguments of Hetty Johnson. "Hetty Johnson...was on TV tonight," began the article:

She said that the one in five people who have been abused as a child were angry at the Bill Henson exhibition.

I am one such person for whom she claims to speak. I was abused, but I am not angry at Bill Henson. I am saddened by those who would shut him up...

The message now being sent loud and clear during the controversy over Bill Henson's art is that their bodies are pornographic ...

The author goes on to describe his experiences of abuse and the adolescent shame about his body that prevented him from telling his parents what the doctor had done to him. "Even now I can not give voice to what led me to being so protective of my mother, to shield her from my body. For that is

what I was doing. But now a lapsed Catholic, I know that a lot of it had to do with shame.” And in the final sentence he declares, “I see no shame in Bill Henson’s work.”

### **Shame as the nude child**

As we can see, the trope of shame everywhere saturated public debate. Yet what seems to have united rather than divided pro- and anti-Henson commentary is a commitment to locating shame anywhere but with N in particular and nude children in general. Both sides register concern about the potentially debilitating effects of shame heaped onto N and vulnerable children, no matter what their source. Both agree that the sexualization of children—not to mention child pornography—is shameful and wrong, even if they differ as to what constitutes a sexual image and what constitutes the meaning and evidence of sexualization. Instead it is with adults that the shame resides: shame for participating in N’s sexualization, or shame for casting her image as pornographic, or shame for intruding on her private world.

I’d like to reorient this discussion of shame in order to bring more clearly into view an important dimension that seems to have been overlooked or left uninterrogated—perhaps shamed—in and by the debate. Contrary to those that see no shame in the Henson image of N, I suggest that the image itself might instead be read as a quintessential representation of shame, and it is this that gets at the heart of what is so troubling for many critics. Although a number of commentators referred to the connotations of shame associated with nakedness in the Christian tradition, few spoke of the representation of shame in the image itself. This is not at all surprising, perhaps, given the almost uniform desire of almost all adult commentators, both pro- and anti-Henson, to recuperate the innocence (or at least vulnerability and non-culpability) of N and protect her from unnecessary scrutiny. Abigail Bray (2009:182) offers a reading of shame



in relation to the image, connecting it to heterosexual paedophilic objectification. The “photograph reminds me of the paralysis of a childhood shamed and silenced by the intrusive attention of men on the streets, at school, in my home. Her withdrawn frozen body reminds me of the numbing impact of sexual objectification, of the unspeakable grief of a stolen dignity, of the silencing humiliations of looks, touches, and comments from adult men.” However, given that N, with the approval of her parents, volunteered to participate in being photographed, and that both she and her parents are reportedly extremely happy with the image, would suggest a very different set of relationships, affective relations, and gazes.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, when I first viewed the photograph that so outraged Hetty Johnson, Rudd and many others, my immediate association was indeed with one of the most iconic Western images of shame. I am referring to Rubens’ “Eve,” of the infamous coupling Adam and Eve. Eyes downcast, genitals covered. Unlike Kremmer, though, I see this is a characteristic expression of shame: “literally an ambivalent turning of the eyes away from the object toward the face, toward the self” (Tomkins 2008:360-361).

Eve’s shame is made possible not by innocence, but by its loss or absence. She has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and is aware that she is naked. She is born into shame and must cover herself from the gaze of the other. Like the story of Adam and Eve, what the image of N indexes, I argue, is the inevitable coming into being of a particular kind of shame-consciousness. This is a representation of shame-consciousness that is intricately entangled with an awareness of one’s nakedness, the social strictures around the presentation of nude bodies, and a sense of privacy with regard to one’s embodiment. Silvan Tomkins and other affect theorists consider the face to be the central site of affect and medium of affect transmission (Tomkins 2008:106). Moreover, affect is notoriously contagious, as Tomkins emphasizes, and this uneasiness about N’s display of affect has clearly reverberated with many audiences (Tomkins 2008:163-

164). With this idea in mind, perhaps it is not so much the nudity of the Henson image of N by itself that so scandalized, but the facial display of adolescent shame in the context of nudity.

Pivotal to the much-remarked issue of Henson capturing a moment in N's transition from childhood to adulthood is puberty. What makes N's image so powerful is that this representation of shame-consciousness is contextualized in relation to the budding pubertal body. Sally Munt (2008:2) suggests that shame "performs culturally to mark out certain groups." When it comes to sexuality particularly, adolescents are among these groups. Puberty, like nudity, has a palpable connection to shame in dominant cultural narratives and many experiences of adolescent development. Indeed, especially (although not only) for girls, puberty is often overdetermined with shame. Menstruation, breast development, and sexual objectification by others are often the source of shyness, embarrassment, vulnerability, and a newly emerging self-consciousness about their internally *sexualizing*, not just culturally *sexualized*, bodies (Martin 1996). Also like nudity, puberty is a metonymy for sexuality. Puberty is discursively and experientially linked for many of us, to the formation and consolidation of self-conscious sexual identities.<sup>13</sup>

At its most basic, shame, as Donald Nathanson (1992:145) points out, is the result of an "exposure of something that we would have preferred kept hidden, of a private part of the self." Coupled with a naked pubescent body, therefore, it would likely be difficult in Anglophone societies for the self-conscious, shame-like pose of N not to be evocative at some level of blossoming child sexuality, about which most Western societies are extremely taciturn. Nathanson (1992:259) reminds us, moreover, that there "is perhaps no aspect of adult life as securely linked to shame...as our relation to sex."<sup>14</sup> This is because shame is delicately woven with the positive affects and emotions most primarily constitutive of sexuality: interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy.<sup>15</sup> As Tomkins himself points out, shame "operates or-

dinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated,” and is the result of the “incomplete reduction” of these affects (Tomkins 2008:353). Precisely by referencing a shame-infused and naked pubertal child—the so-called loss, or shattering, of innocence—Henson is raising the spectre of childhood sexuality that ghosts, indeed constitutes, this nascent sexual self. The ‘shattering of innocence’ is not necessarily the effect of the adult gaze, the invasion of privacy, or the public circulation of the images. Innocence is shattered, if you like, by the subject’s awareness of the embodied unfoldings of puberty combined with an apprehension of cultural taboos around nudity and sexuality. This is the assimilation of the knowledge and embodied experience that in Western cultures sexuality and nudity are tightly braided with shame. Henson is inviting us to peek behind the veil of shame into the private world of nascent child sexuality and subjectivity, or at least conjure it. It is perhaps the bringing together of shame and sexuality so overtly within the same frame that has prompted so many within both pro- and anti-Henson camps to describe the depictions as “unsettling,” “haunting,” “disturbing,” and “confronting”—not to mention “disgusting” and “revolting.”

Interestingly, these affective reactions resemble Freud’s description of some of the effects of the uncanny. For Freud (1919), the uncanny signifies those feelings lying “within the field of the frightening”. Included in this realm are the “feelings of repulsion and distress” (Freud 1919:219). The uncanny, Freud says, “is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1919:220). Just as shame is often the result of an “exposure of something that we would have preferred kept hidden, of a private part of the self” (Nathanson 1992:145) so is the uncanny the effect of “what ought to have remained hidden [or repressed] but has come to light” (Freud 1919:241).<sup>16</sup> The signifier of childhood sexuality is that which Henson ought to have kept hidden, and whose exposure via the imaging of pubertal shame, has perhaps prompted for many adult

viewers the horror of the uncanny. Henson's image, in other words, has dredged up some extremely discomfiting affects and feelings about the sexual child that some adults would prefer to have kept buried.

### **Shaming the sexual child**

The revelation of child sexuality is so troubling that it is scarcely articulable in the current climate of paedophile and child sexual abuse panic. Indeed, commenting on the Henson scandal, Kylie Valentine noted "there has been very little discussion about adolescent sexuality" (Valentine 2008). *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Paul Sheehan (2008:29) went even further to claim that hysteria "engulfed...the entire issue of pubescent sexuality."<sup>17</sup> Certainly many commentators mentioned the pubertal body of N, and the image's registration of pubescent sexual awakening. However, for the most part it was left at that—or else the sexual impulses, desires, motives and intentions of the so-called sexually awakened adolescent were themselves rewritten as innocent: so N and other young adolescents are not innocent of sexuality, but their sexualities are framed as infantile, immature, proto-sexual, and *unadult*-like. In any case, debate has been framed overwhelmingly around the following questions and sets of issues. Are the images art or pornography, and what is the line dividing the two? Are the 'child' models sexualized? Do the images exploit childhood innocence? Is it possible for child models to consent to being photographed nude? And does the circulation of the images cause harm to the young people photographed? Thus, it has largely been the figure of the *sexualized* rather than sexual child that has dominated public discussion.<sup>18</sup>

Even according to those few commentators that had serious reservations about the Henson representations but that were nonetheless willing to broach the issue of child sexuality, the implied consensus seemed to be that adults should not be voyeuristically scrutinizing the emerging sexualities of young people. Lindy Allen, chief executive of Regional Arts

Victoria, asks: “[W]hose province is it to explore pre-teen sexuality?” “[S]houldn’t we leave them [teenagers] alone and let them get on with it.”<sup>9</sup> Or as Michael Coulter (2010) pronounced, in response to Henson’s own claims that there has been an hysterical response to the photos, “it is not puritanism and ‘pandemic fear’ (his words) to ask: is there a moral issue with photos taken for adults that dwell so intently in the sexual awakening of children?” Like Lindy Allen, this question is rhetorical, and Coulter has already decided it is morally (and perhaps affectively) highly problematical. The underlying assumption of the anti-Henson and child protection camp is that adults ought to avert their gaze because, as Coulter puts it, “images of nude girls might normalise the idea of children as sexual objects.” Interestingly, this call to look away from the sexual child (“leave them alone and let them get on with it”) mimics the very movement of shame itself, which according to Tomkins is a form of turning away from the object (or subject) that is the very stimulus of shame.

But is objectification, and the harm thought to result from it, all that we are really trying to screen children, and ourselves, from? We have heard a great deal about children as sexual objects, but what about the fact of children as sexual *subjects*? If we are to accept the consensus among commentators that the sexual objectification of children is wrong, then the “sexual awakening of children” being cited and simultaneously skirted in the public debate refers not to children as sexual objects, but in fact to children as sexual *subjects*. However, there has been virtually no discussion about the sexual subjectivities of children. Indeed, the figure of the child-as-sexual-subject appears to be the elephant in the corner (or centre?) of the Henson scandal and Western culture generally. To be sure, the master discourses of child protection and childhood innocence militate against her appearance. But by raising the spectre of this subject—in this case, the child that volunteered to be photographed nude and agreed to have images of herself publicly exhibited—Henson is placing pressure on our cherished

constructs of childhood innocence and infantilized subjectivity and agency.<sup>20</sup> I have a hunch that the scandal is as much—perhaps even more—about the disturbing effects elicited in the face of this child sexual subject as it is about concerns over adults sexualizing and objectifying nude teens.

Comments made by Hetty Johnston under attack perhaps offer one glimpse of this. Johnston has fiercely and repeatedly rebuked N's parents for allowing her to be photographed nude, claiming that it will scar her for life. Meanwhile, in her own child abuse crusading Johnston herself has for many years been publicly exposing the fact that her daughter was abused by her father-in-law when she was seven. Marr recounts an incident when Johnston was pressed to defend the hypocrisy of her invasion of her own daughter's privacy by public exposure: "It's a very different scenario," she said. She said her daughter was not "being exploited for commercial purposes," and "She didn't strip off naked" (65). This reeks of a backhanded Freudian swipe at N herself. Although perhaps an extreme example, there are only several degrees of separation from Johnston's remarks to those of child psychologists such as Biddulph quoted earlier. Biddulph seems to be rather certain—and here he is directly addressing the issue of N posing nude—that teenage behaviour which may be considered "cool and exciting one day...they *would* regard with horror and embarrassment on another day" (Biddulph 2008:13, emphasis added). Either way, and whether intentional or not, N's behaviour is implicitly being placed under scrutiny, even if it is couched within a notion of childhood innocence. Even Biddulph's comments hover dangerously close to, if they are not already irrevocably entangled with, the suggestion that N ought to be some day ashamed of having posed nude, or at least she ought to be some day ashamed of thinking she knew what she was doing at age 13.

## Conclusion

When the boundaries between child and adult sexualities are blurred or overlap, or when adult sexualities or sexual frameworks or knowledges are seen to be prematurely imposed upon children, scandals often erupt. The Henson case is one of these, and it is in my view exemplary of a typical *response* to the social and discursive commingling of children and sexuality. This response is to place the figure of the child as agentive sexual subject *under erasure*. This is not to say that the notion of children having sexual subjectivities is repudiated. Rather, where the fact of child sexual subjectivities is conceded (and usually it is), routinely these subjectivities are at once acknowledged and avoided—although sometimes just avoided—and/or they are at once (over)protected from scrutiny and objectified as homogeneous Child, exalted in their innocence and demonized in their transgressions, endlessly spoken about and endlessly rendered mute.

My perhaps somewhat counterintuitive claim is that child sex panics, such as this one, often seem to be at their most histrionic less in cases of forced, violent, or horrific sexual exploitation and abuse, than when children's sexual curiosities, desires, pleasures, agency—in short, their active and affirmative subjectivities—are brought into the social frame. Herein lies one of the major bugbears, as I see it, of this scandal (and other child sex scandals like it): What to do with the fact that the sexual child, such as N, is not the passive recipient of the adult gaze or adult sexuality. Often she looks back, speaks back, touches back, and indeed initiates and colludes with adults, not to mention often strips for them or has sex with them voluntarily (with or without parental consent). So when Paul Sheehan and others lament that hysteria engulfed the entire issue of adolescent sexuality, I suggest this is precisely one of the strategies of the scandal itself, if it is possible to say that there are strategies. Here I am thinking of strategies as part of power relations that are, as Foucault famously puts it, “both intentional and non-subjective.” Power relations have aims and

objectives, and in this way they are intentional; but they are also beyond an individual or group's control—in that no individual or group *possesses* power and the power relations have unintended consequences—and so are non-subjective.<sup>21</sup> For example, it is not necessarily that anti-Henson campaigners, such as Hetty Johnson, *intend* to deny and conceal the issue of adolescent sexuality. They may intend to counter the sexual objectification of children. However, the nonsubjective consequences of their interventions are that adolescent sexuality and agency are eclipsed. The so-called “hysteria” therefore serves not just to express adult anxieties and fears about the exploitation of children. Among other defensive strategies—whether unwitting or not—are the deflection of attention and diversion of the adult gaze away not just from the figure of the child as sexual object, but away from her as *sexual subject*.<sup>22</sup>

Why do we turn away from the child-as-sexual-subject? Let me conclude with a provocation: the *overt* concern about protecting children from sexualization, exploitation, and abuse has been masking and obscuring a *latent* and equally (if not often more) palpable anxiety that Western societies are having extreme difficulty grappling with, let alone adequately recognizing at this historical juncture. Buried beneath the palpable fear of child sexualization and abuse by adults is an underlying and perhaps more primary fear of *the sexualities of children*. If the anxiety about the protection of children from abuse by adults is the public face of sex panic discourses, the fear of the corruptive, disruptive, and seductive—even shameful—effects of *child sexual subjectivity and agency* is its troublesome underside.

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## NOTES

1 Thanks to the anonymous reviewers and to Annamari Vänskä for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

2 The image featured at the beginning of this article is the front cover of David Marr's (2008) book on the scandal. The full-size image features the breasts and pudenda, however I do not have permission to reproduce it here.

3 On the United States, see American Psychological Association (2007). *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls*. Washington, D.C. 2007.

4 The Henson scandal is preceded by only a matter of a few months by the police raid in Finland of an exhibition in the Kluuvi Gallery by artist Ulla Karttunen, entitled "Ekstaattisia naisia" ("Ecstatic Women"). Although the exhibition was critical of child pornography and the eroticisation of children, Karttunen was herself investigated, and convicted, for possession and dissemination of child pornography. See Jyränki & Kalha (2009). Of course, scandals surrounding artistic depictions of nude minors have been a feature especially in the North American context since the advent of the anti-child-pornography movement in the late 1970s and 1980s. See Stanley (1991) for an account of this period.

5 The cliché of "letting kids be kids" has been widely circulating in public discussions in recent years. Indeed, its less colloquial formulation was the title of a 2006 report published by the not-for-profit Australian think-tank The Australia Institute, *Letting children be children* (Rush & La Nauze 2006b). The report, along with its companion piece *Corporate paedophilia: sexualisation of children in Australia* (Rush & La Nauze 2006), was intended to foster awareness of the problem and to agitate for government action. For a critique of these reports, see Egan & Hawke (2008).

6 Dean's comment is being made in the context of a discussion of promiscuity, however, he also seems to be making a general point about the psychic forces underpinning volatile reactions generally.

7 Richard Mohr (2004:20) argues that "Society needs the pedophile: his existence allows everyone else to view sexy children innocently".

8 Under the New South Wales *Crimes Act* 1900, child pornography is defined as “material that depicts or describes (or appears to depict or describe), in a manner that would in all the circumstances cause offence to reasonable persons, a person who is (or appears to be) a child [under the age of 16]” and who is “engaged in sexual activity” or placed “in a sexual context.”

9 The Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) reiterated this view, noting that: “Mere nudity is not sufficient to create a “sexual context”. The context is the subject taken with what surrounds it and interacts with it. There is nothing in the photographs of the girl and her surroundings, in my view, that could be fairly be described as providing a sexual context to her image” (qtd in Marr 2008:123).

10 Or to quote Biddulph (2008:13): “Photographing teenage children naked and exposed, while it could be innocent and beautiful in a different kind of world, takes their power away and their privacy away and let’s the world in’.”

11 According to James Kincaid (1998), of course, it is through the very category of “innocence” that we have eroticised childhood and children.

12 I would also note that it is important to acknowledge a range of forms of shame. There is a world of difference between a shame tethered to sexual interest and that resulting from a sense of traumatising sexual objectification of which Bray speaks.

13 This is not to suggest that sexual desires, pleasures, and ‘orientations’ emerge only at puberty, only that the development of sexual self-identity categories often coincides with puberty and adolescence.

14 Nathanson, *Shame and Pride*, 259.

15 Tomkins (2008:xix-xx) identified nine primary affects, with eight of these conceptualized as a spectrum by way of a joint name: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust, and anger-rage. Each of the terms in the polarity are distinguished only with regard to density, with the left term signifying the affect experienced at low density and the right at high. A ninth affect is dissmell. Just

as disgust is understood to be the affect corresponding to the rejection of foods that are unacceptable to taste, so dissmell is the affect corresponding to the rejection of unacceptable odors.

16 Freud is here quoting Schelling's theory of the uncanny. "This reference to the factor of repression enables us," he proposes, "to understand Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light."

17 An article in the Sunday Telegraph defended the hysterical response, even in those very terms: "If the community can't get 'hysterical' about naked pictures of a 13-year-old, what can it get hysterical about?" (qtd in Marr 2008:138).

18 The Classification Board also reiterated the main thrust of community debate over Henson, when it had an Art Monthly cover shot of a nude 7-year-old girl referred to it for classification. The cover was printed as a deliberate response to the Henson scandal and a show of support for Henson and artistic depictions of nude children: "The Board notes that the publication contains images and text relating to ongoing community debate about the difference between art and pornography, what constitutes paedophilic images and the perceived sexualisation of children in the media and the arts" (qtd in Marr 2008:141).

19 Qtd in "Panel weight in on art versus porn debate", Australian Broadcasting Corporation Transcripts, 30 May 2008.

20 Joanne Faulkner (2011:130) notes that "Henson's model was an object lesson for Australia's youth, who are liable to be branded 'revolting' by no less than the prime minister if they publicly display their agency and vulnerability."

21 As Foucault himself said, "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does" (qtd in McLaren 2004:231, note13), On power as intentional and nonsubjective, see Foucault (1990:94-95). This is also rather long – can you think of doing the same here as above?

22 Bray (2009) argues that claims that the Henson scandal is indicative of a moral panic are themselves part of a normative discourse of neoliberal tolerance

that governs the public gaze, erases feminist critiques of heteronormative paedophilia, and depoliticises child sexual abuse (CSA). She suggests that within this reactionary moral panic discourse, “CSA moral panics are often argued to perform a puritanical erasure of children’s sexual agency through an irrational focus on children in general as potential victims of sexual abuse” (175). A central feature of this “neoliberal narrative,” she argues, “is a celebration of children’s sexual liberation and agency as a form of individual self-empowerment that triumphs over the reactionary victim politics of CSA moral panics” (175). No examples from the Henson scandal are given to support this assumption; indeed, Bray merely refers to a strain of academic “radical liberation discourses” represented by Slavoj Žižek, Michel Foucault, Guy Hocquenghem, Ellis Hanson, among others. The connection to the Henson commentary is explained thus: “The 2008 media celebration of Bill Henson’s photographs of naked girls can be read in the context of this reification of the sexual child as an emblem of radical sexual politics” (178). However, in the context of the Henson media response, as myself and others have shown (egs Valentine 2008; Faulkner 2011), there was no celebration of the sexual child whatsoever. Moreover, far from being erased, concerns about heteronormative paedophilia and child sexual abuse predominated in the debates. In attempting to reclaim a feminist critical gaze, Bray has herself reified an objectifying adult gaze and remained silent on the question of the subjectivity of N and other young people.

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## ABSTRACT

**STEVEN ANGELIDES**

### **What's behind child sex panics? The Bill Henson scandal**

When a nation-wide scandal erupted over Australian artist Bill Henson's 2008 exhibition incorporating photographs of teenage nudes, public debate centred on the following kinds of questions. Are the images art or pornography? Are the 'child' models sexualized? Can the public circulation of the images result in a potentially harmful exploitation of childhood 'innocence'? Can child models consent to being photographed nude? Rather than adjudicate these debates, this article interrogates that which they evade. It argues that the overt concern about protecting children from sexualization, exploitation, and abuse has been masking and obscuring a latent and equally (if not often more) palpable anxiety that Western societies are having extreme difficulty grappling with, let alone adequately acknowledging at this historical juncture: children's agentive sexual subjectivities.

## SAMMANFATTNING

**STEVEN ANGELIDES**

### **Vad ligger bakom barnsexpanik? Bill Henson-skandalen**

Den 22 maj 2008 exploderade en landsomfattande skandal kring en utställning av den australiske fotografen Bill Henson. Henson är en internationellt erkänd

fotokonstnär, känd för sina fotografier av ungdomar. Denna speciella utställning tilldrog sig allmänhetens uppmärksamhet när vernissagekortet, med en bild av en naken 13-årig flicka med knoppande bröst och händerna för genitalierna, skickades ut. Bilden gav upphov till en sådan kontrovers att utställningen fick stängas innan den ens hunnit öppna. Myndigheterna övervägde att väcka åtal för sedlighets- och barnpornografibrott, galleriet blev utsatt för hot och sedan uttalade sig premiärministern Kevin Rudd i TV och kallade vissa av bilderna ”motbjudande”. Den intensiva offentliga debatt som följde rörde frågor av följande slag: Är bilderna konst eller pornografi? Är ”barnmodellerna” sexualiserade? Kan det offentliga cirkulerandet av bilderna leda till en potentiellt sett skadlig exploatering av barndomens ”oskuldssfullhet”? Kan barnmodeller ge sitt samtycke till att bli fotograferade nakna? Istället för att försöka avgöra dessa debatter, undersöker denna artikel det som de kollektivt undvek. Den hävdar att det framträdande engagemanget för att skydda barn mot sexualisering, exploatering och övergrepp har maskerat och dolt en latent och lika (om inte ofta mer) påtaglig rädsla som västerländska samhällen har stora svårigheter att adekvat hantera, för att inte tala om erkänna, vid denna historiska tidpunkt: barns aktörssbaserade sexuella subjektiviteter.

Artikeln börjar med att undersöka den centrala betydelse tropen skam har i den offentliga debatten. Å ena sidan menade många av Hensons kritiker att arbetet vittnade om en skamlig och ökad sexualisering av barns kroppar i västerländska samhällen och ett intrång i ungdomars privata livssfär. Å andra sidan invände många av Hensons anhängare att själva påståendena om sexualisering på ett försåtligt sätt tjänade till att skambelägga den nakna tonåringen genom att betrakta den som pornografisk. Genom att omorientera diskussionen om skam via Silvan Tomkins affektteori, hävdas att bilden i skandalens centrum är störande just därför att den är en framställning av en form av skam som är oupplösligt förenad med ungdomssexualitet. Det hävdas emellertid att Hensonskandalen, i likhet med mängder av andra fall av västerländsk barnsexpanik, exemplifierar en defensiv reaktion på det sexuella barnet varigenom hon/



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han utsätts för ett uttraderande. Det är inte alltid eller nödvändigtvis så att det sexuella barnets existens förnekas eller fullständigt ignoreras, utan ofta erkänns och infantiliseras barnets sexualitet på samma gång. På detta sätt vänder vi oss ifrån (eller skambelägger) det sexuella barnet i det ögonblick hon/han framträder. Artikeln avslutas med att argumentera att barnsexpanik ofta blir som mest histrioniskt, inte så mycket på grund av exponerandet av fruktansvärt utnyttjande och övergrepp från vuxnas sida, utan snarare av exponerandet av påtagliga former av barns sexuella aktörskap.