

Interrogating the Representation of Children in *Images of Childhood*

Review of Paul Duncum's *Images of Childhood: A Visual History from Stone to Screen*, by Jenni Lauwrens

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Since ancient times, pictures of children have served a variety of ideological functions. Images of childhood continue to subtly both produce and reproduce prevailing beliefs about and attitudes toward childhood so that these ideas become common sense. More recently, in visually saturated modern societies where images pervade almost every aspect of daily life, depictions of children have increased exponentially. In his timely book *Images of Childhood: A Visual History from Stone to Screen* (Bloomsbury, 2023), Paul Duncum argues that childhood is a social construction. In arguing this point he exposes some of the discourses created about children through pictures. In this way, *Images of Childhood* defamiliarizes childhood, showing that, far from being a normal and natural state, childhood is and always has been thoroughly mythologized.

Images are powerful because they are ubiquitous, transparent, and seductive. As a prominent scholar of visual culture, Duncum takes the approach of emphasizing that, because the meanings of images are never stable or settled, images of children can be put to various (mis)uses. By examining the selected images—their production, for whom they were made, and how their lives, as pictures, unfolded—Duncum is able to expose how these pictures powerfully construct different conceptions of childhood.

Images of Childhood is organized thematically rather than chronologically, with each of its 11 chapters dealing with a particular way in which children have been represented and constructed in pictures. Thus, the book traverses images of children as family members, as gendered, as adults, as schooled, as aesthetic objects, as victims, as threats, as having economic value, as propaganda, and as innocent. These themes reveal that images of children have more to do with the ways that adults imagine childhood to be than about how real children actually experience childhood. Furthermore, across all the chapters Duncum highlights that the association of childhood with innocence and purity is exploited as a strategy to influence sociopolitical discourse. It is precisely because children are understood as innocent that pictures of children are so powerful.

Chapter 1 provides a historical context and frame for the chapters that follow. Beginning in antiquity and ending in the 21st century, this chapter shows how depictions of children have been yoked to political ideas, such as the benefits of population growth among the elite. This chapter also explores the ways in which children have been represented—as either abstractions, as types, or as individuals—which also has reflected prevailing philosophical views. For instance, in the 18th century, the Enlightenment emphasis on individuality meant that children's individual character was depicted. A particularly fascinating discussion centers on the introduction of Kodak's Brownie Box to the wider public in 1900, which made it easier for parents to record their children's ever-changing appearance. Pictures of mothers and children, and in particular babies, proliferated, thus cementing motherhood as part of a woman's domestic duties. Mass consumption and the popularization of domestic scenes occurred simultaneously and laid the foundation for the kinds of image-sharing practices that are so much a part of everyday life in the 21st century.

In Chapter 2 the focus turns to pictures of children that serve to reinforce the family unit as foundational to the

social structure. Through an analysis of pictures of families and the positions and poses of children in these pictures, Duncum demonstrates how prevailing ideas about what constitutes the ideal family have changed over time. In earlier historical periods, when children were pictured alongside other family members they may have conveyed spiritual beliefs, social status, or ancestry. In such images, children were often depicted as part of the wealthy subject's possessions as much as were the land and livestock that surrounded them. Pictures of families therefore served as demonstrations of ownership and status. Today, as in the past, pictures of families serve sociological ends in that they represent to people what is considered a normal nuclear family, and sometimes even the opposite—a dysfunctional one. In TV series and on online image-sharing platforms, images of children as family members are contrived and agenda driven, supporting the state through the family.

Chapter 3 examines how children have been gendered according to their clothing—in terms of colour, fabric, and style—as well as their poses—as either active or passive. I found it interesting that boys were dressed like girls until the 19th century and often wore dresses until the age of 6 or 7. Of course, this practice is no longer condoned and instead it is more likely nowadays that girls wearing boys' clothes is more acceptable than boys wearing girls' clothes. In other words, whereas the feminization of childhood used to be a common practice, with boys going through a rite of passage when they began wearing trousers, now it is more likely that girls are encouraged to take on masculine traits like aggression and violence. The array of different types of images discussed in this chapter is remarkable and reminded me of John Berger's (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. For instance, Duncum discusses a 19th-century advert for cocaine drops alongside a 21st-century picture from Shutterstock. The two images demonstrate how, despite changing social attitudes about the traditional roles and characteristics assigned to boys and girls, images continue to construct girls as passive assistants to active boys.

Chapter 4 deals with how, at different times, the distinction between children and adults has either been maintained or blurred. Up until the 19th century, children were far more integrated into adult life than they are today. They were not protected from violence, death, labour, or sex until the end of the 18th century, when emphasis began to be placed on childhood innocence. Ideas about how childhood innocence has been constructed in pictures is central in this chapter. Duncum uses the example of the Boy Bishop, who appeared in medieval carnivals, to show that the integration of children into adult life also marks their innate separation from it. The Boy Bishop would pretend to be an actual bishop, wearing a smaller version of the bishop's clothes, giving sermons, and blessing people. But he also tended to misbehave quite badly and had to be disciplined and brought under control once again. The juxtaposition of the medieval Boy Bishop with contemporary child participants in pageant culture is especially thought provoking. By wearing adult makeup and clothing, photographs of children who participate in pageants might exemplify the blurring of boundaries between adulthood and childhood. Duncum, however, concludes that images of children as adults more often than not undermine their status as adults, keeping adult identity safe.

Chapter 5 deals with how images portray different views about the purpose and methods of schooling children, if they are schooled at all. This chapter explores ideas ranging from Rousseau's notion that children are inherently good and should be kept that way to Locke's perspective that children are a blank slate, and from schools centered on religious instruction to those centered on schooling children to become good citizens of the state. Duncum argues that formal school photographs picture ideas about belonging and loyalty and in turn (re)produce children as future workers who are obedient to authority. Duncum observes that in their focus on order and surveillance, discipline and punishment, 21st-century schools reflect the spatial and temporal organization of 19th-century prisons. Schools are therefore places of indoctrination, never more apparent than in the Nazi-run education system.

Duncum's point is that even though schools might in some small ways encourage the development of children's agency, for the most part they are founded on the idea that children are wayward and unruly and need to be

disciplined. Therefore, schooling systems and the images that produce and reproduce them demonstrate more about what kinds of adults children become than about what children actually are.

Chapter 6 explores the aestheticization of children—and the portrayal of cuteness in particular—either as a device to evoke nostalgia for a bygone era or as a fantasy of a better future. The chapter focuses on three historical periods that saw a marked increase in the proliferation of “cute aesthetics.” First, paintings of chubby cupids, putti and real children emerged in the late 18th and 19th centuries during the industrial revolution as antidotes to production and materialism. At this time, the aestheticization of children delighted in childhood as a reminder of a more beautiful past. Second, Duncum explores the culture of cuteness that began in the 1990s with Anne Geddes’s photographs of cute babies in unimaginable settings and impossible poses. These images emerged at a time when commentators claimed that, due to soaring numbers of children being victims of psychological and sexual abuse as well as children being used as soldiers, coupled with an alarming rise in child pornography, childhood innocence was disappearing. And finally, Duncum observes the cult of cuteness proliferating as an antidote to concerns over increasing social fragmentation in the early 2000s. In all of these examples, aestheticism works as a form of coercion and control, where adults (and not the children) have agency to choose how their children appear to wider audiences.

In Chapter 6 Duncum argues that the aim of aestheticizing children is to trigger nurturing responses from adults. In Chapter 7 he shows that the aim of picturing children as victims is sometimes to raise outrage and effect change, while such images may also inadvertently appeal to audiences that find pleasure in suffering. This chapter is difficult to read. From child sacrifices in the interest of appeasing the gods, to infanticide for population control and filicide to enact revenge, this chapter deals with various ways in which children have been depicted suffering, dying, or dead and the consequences of such depictions. Duncum interrogates the dubious uses and abuses of images of children as victims in religion contexts, mythology, folklore, and documentary photography. While Duncum negotiates the differing outcomes of depictions of the plight of vulnerable children, the reader is confronted with images of destitute children, of children being beaten and abused, of children as labourers and as subjects of child pornography.

Chapter 8 deals with a variety of images in which both real and fictional children are shown as evil, monstrous, or simply bad. Duncum explores the varied purposes these images serve, which range from showing children to be inherently bad to showing that children may become evil due to environmental, social, or psychological factors. The horror genre is a particularly interesting case. These representations not only challenge the idea that children are inherently innocent but also suggest that children become repositories of adult fears evoked by the abject. Duncum connects the popularity of the trope of horrifying children in the 1950s to the topic of children and the family in mainstream popular culture. He also traces the foundations of malevolent children in horror to much earlier depictions of wicked infant Greek gods and to depictions in oral histories of the child Jesus as a homicidal maniac, as told in lesser-known accounts dating from the second century. In these depictions, children possess both good and evil qualities, thus reflecting adult attitudes toward the ambiguous nature of childhood.

Chapter 9 addresses the economic value of children as labourers who contribute to the work force, as consumers to whom products are marketed, and as influencers on what their parents buy. While child labour is frowned on in most first-world countries today, before the 20th century it was the norm. Children were often employed in family businesses and cottage industries and in factories and coal mines after the onset of industrialization. Then as now, images of their labour served different purposes. Lewis Hines’s photographs of children in employment provided evidence of their exploitation, while paintings for the middle class—who benefitted from child labour—often represented them as individual and entrepreneurial. In the 1920s to 1930s advertisers transformed children into

consumers, with the benefits of toys being emphasized. More recently, consumer capitalism relies heavily on the business of images, with images of children, or images directed at children, all alarmingly designed to activate the hedonistic desire for goods, services, and experiences.

From the first century B.C.E. to the 21st century, images of charming, happy children have been used to promote political causes. Chapter 10 investigates how children have been used as propaganda in support of various political agendas. For families wishing to promote their power, the presumed innocence, naivety, and vulnerability of children has been used to indicate stability, legitimacy, and continuity. Duncum shows how totalitarian leaders, from Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Zedong to Putin and Xi Jinping, have been depicted alongside adoring children in order to cast these leaders in a paternalistic light, thereby humanizing them and presenting them as fathers of their respective nations. Moreover, pictures of children have been used to promote ideas about war and to recruit soldiers. Likewise, photographs of orphaned and dead child refugees have been used to bolster various opinions about the refugee crisis because the emotional impact of a child being killed or hurt is far higher than that solicited by the death or suffering of an adult.

While the myth of childhood innocence forms the basis of all the preceding arguments, Chapter 11 explores this idea in greater depth. Duncum argues that by equating children with nature, their purity and natural virtue are presumed to be self-evident. Although depictions of childhood innocence have pervaded visual culture since antiquity, this chapter focuses on the remarkable attention given this topic in Romantic art and poetry of the late 18th century through to the mid 19th century. In these depictions, charming children either nostalgically refer to a happier rural life in the preindustrialized past or act as harbingers of progress and a brighter future. This chapter examines images of innocent infants, cupids, putti, cherubs, angels, and young girls depicted either nude or scantily clad, and in doing so Duncum asks whether these depictions might have functioned as premodern child pornography made available to the pedophilic gaze.

Images of Childhood demythologizes some of our most common assumptions about children and the nature of childhood. It will be of immense interest to researchers, scholars, and specialists in childhood studies and visual culture. By shining a spotlight on the nexus of childhood and pictures, it sets itself apart from other texts in childhood studies, such as those by Heywood (2018), Cunningham (2020), and Stearns (2021). Duncum's sophisticated handling of a tremendously wide variety of images is admirable; each chapter folds thoughtfully and neatly into the next and in so doing builds up an increasingly rich argument. Although the images are organized around specific themes across the book's 11 chapters, I found it impressive that Duncum cross-references images throughout, showing how some pictures are applicable to more than one argument.

While dazzling in the richness of the images discussed—from stone to screen and from altar pieces to documentary photographs—this book is not for the faint hearted. Disturbing images are placed alongside or in close proximity to images of happy, smiling children. The photograph of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi (p. 212), whose tiny, lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach in 2015 after his family fled the war in Syria, is one striking example. Duncum does not skirt around the question of the ethics of photographing, looking at, and publishing such unsettling images. Instead, he confronts the issue head-on in ways that sometimes makes the reader feel, if not complicit in the misuse of images of children, then certainly more aware of their circulation and impact in everyday life. Duncum's careful arguments draw attention to the lack of children's agency in the widespread dissemination of their images on Twitter, the blogosphere and various social media sites on the internet, where their meanings are continuously up for negotiation. This book is a sobering reminder that depictions of children serve ideological agendas that have little to do with actual children. Precisely because children are presumed innocent—and lacking many things that come with adulthood—their representation is subject to an endless array of (ab)uses.

References

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