

# Deciphering the Ambiguous Menace of Sexuality for the Innocence of Childhood

J. C. W. Gooren

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**Abstract** This article examines how late modern Western society/culture deals with the utterly despised phenomenon of paedophilia. It will be argued there are ambiguous factors and forces, which are an inherent part of mainstream culture and the wider social fabric, that make an unequivocal stand against sexuality interfering with children somewhat hypocritical. The zealous efforts in battling sexual child molesters as the primordial danger for the innocence of childhood are seen as a strategy for overt redemption. A hidden agenda is detected by recovering complicit support from a diverse range of adjacent sources that defies the genuineness of guarding the sexual innocence of children.

The perversions that command the greatest attention and/or intensity of response are those whose incomprehensibility is lessened by a diminishing of differences that certify their very status as perversion. In other words, attention is paid to those perversions that begin to appear on the shadowy borders of plausibility and, as a result, where the increased scrutiny for signs of such taint in others occasions a similar scrutiny of the self (Simon 1994, 10).

## Introduction

In Spring of 2006 The Netherlands was confronted by a new and curious political party that held rather libertarian beliefs for organizing Dutch society, particularly radical and subversive with regard to sexuality and youth ‘emancipation’. The founders viewed sex as something fundamentally good and healthy and, in the spirit of Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich as a positive force blocked only by the corrupting influences of civilization and capitalism (Weeks 2003). Very soon the PCFD<sup>1</sup> was exposed as a perverse club and in

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<sup>1</sup> The Party of Charity, Freedom and Diversity. See: <http://www.pnvd.nl/>.

J. C. W. Gooren (✉)  
Faculteit der Rechtsgeleerdheid, Instituut voor Strafrecht & Criminologie,  
Universiteit Leiden, Steenschuur 25, 2311 ES Leiden, The Netherlands  
e-mail: gooren.j.c@gmail.com

popular parlance labelled the 'Paedo Party'. Although its programme was more extensive, the outrage was exclusively focused on ideas concerning the abolishment of statutory rape, pushing for a cut in the legal age of consent,<sup>2</sup> and legalizing the production and consumption of pornography featuring young people. National and international press coverage unleashed massive protest; in a few days the political platform caused worldwide agitation. Reactions of bewilderment such as 'these people need a psychiatrist, not a political party,' 'such sick ideas,' 'look at all possibilities to ban this absolutely disgusting initiative' (see Smits 1st of June 2006) illustrate that there was absolutely no social basis for the revision of moral laws/codes regarding fornication and sexual vice when it concerns children, except to strengthen them. Hence, the phenomenon of paedophilia was staged as a model of 'pure evil.'

What are the interests, contradictions and paradoxes in labeling intergenerational intimacy (let alone take a positive political stance) as the most appalling act of interpersonal contact? Every age has its own folk devils, producing a particular equation for (im)morality. By using various disciplines, most importantly cultural criminology, this article aims at the deconstruction of the symbolic performance of *the paedophile* in the beginning of the twenty-first century. This essay is not concerned with paedophilia as such; more specifically it analyses Western culture and its spasmodic reaction toward this phenomenon. Instead of focusing on child molestation or the misuse of an advantaged position, the focal point is the cultural ambiguity regarding sexuality between generations. Therefore, paedophilia will not be analyzed as pathological or problematic, but as a painful subject/area where a plethora of conditions of late modern society are condensed. In most studies, sexual deviance is seen as something inherently pathological. Conventional frames focus upon the paedophile as a malicious and sex obsessed child molester operating in an otherwise 'normal' and 'healthy' society. Out of an interest in the field of tension between norms and deviance, I emphasize the interconnection of sexual deviance and bourgeois behavior/aesthetics.

In the first section the misunderstanding which makes the topic at hand so controversial will be explicated; antipodal notions of childhood innocence versus malicious paedophilic desire will be scrutinized as to illuminate exaggeration and misinterpretation. This duality facilitates an explicit discourse; a polar diagram of pure innocence and malevolent danger (Douglas 1966; Pratt 2005; Spencer 2009). However, as will be demonstrated in the second section, there are also more ambiguous forces. Especially relevant: that what is portrayed as criminal and deviant is often a reflection and manifestation of something that is covertly normal and desirable. The innocence/danger dichotomy is undermined by youngsters themselves, cultural aesthetics, the commercial lifestyle/entertainment industry, the social implications of technology, the fight against child pornography, the fluidity of sexual identities and tensions within the family. These are all sources of power that trouble the asexuality of childhood, therefore hinting at the generality of paedophilic desire which is far more diffuse and blurry.

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<sup>2</sup> The PCFD opted for dropping the consent age from 16 to 12, before having it scrapped completely. It should be noted that until 2002 statutory rape was already decriminalized in The Netherlands if a minor aged twelve plus insisted that the criminal prosecution should not ensue because the sexual encounter was experienced mutually and freely. At the time, the blockade was considered useful in order to find a balance between the sexual experimentation of adolescents and their protection against potential sexual abuse (Moerings 2000). Now the criminal prosecutors have the authority to decide autonomously if they deem a sexual encounter of a person of age with a youngster (between 12 and 16 years of age) indecent.

## Binary Oppositions: The Innocent Child and the Malicious Paedophile

### The Child as Tabula Rasa

All attention given to paedophilia hides from view that the supposedly inherent asexual nature of the innocent child, considered a sanitary phase gradually moving into defiled maturity is an ideal that does not correspond with reality. Philosophically, distinguishing evolutionary stages for child development and the attribution of innocence to childhood can be accorded to the Romantic movement (Kincaid 1998). More specifically Rousseau, who viewed the unsmothered nature boy as an unstained tabula rasa, a primitively conditioned noble savage as opposed to cultural corrupted sphere of adulthood. In modern day, when it comes to the alleged asexuality of children and the unnatural influence of sexuality, the impact of feminism upholding the child as sexual innocent is of utmost importance (Angelides 2004a). The infant functioning as a precious 'ground zero', is thus useful in organizing narratives for proper childhood as well as proper sexuality. Next to asexuality, childhood is intrinsically linked to happiness; any child affected by misfortune incites a heavy burden onto us adult sinners.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we grown-ups face blame for the omission of guaranteeing safety for the most vulnerable and therefore extremely precious. Our culture is constructed on the assumption that happiness is the birthright of every child. By far this utopia is not met; many children suffer immensely.

This can offer a partial explanation for the intensity of response towards suspects and offenders accused of sexual child abuse. Besides the individual harm against the child, something else is going on. From an ontological point of view the perpetrator has dishonoured the cultural conception of childhood. Because the category of the 'child' maintains an existential relationship with adults, a premature sexually awakened person disrupts the prevailing idea of that quintessential aspect that distinguishes grown-ups from children. The sexually active child ceases to perform its function as a divine creature among adults and closes a symbolic deal with an already corrupted and depraved world. However, there is no such thing as an evidently normal path for healthy sexual development, uncontested guidelines are absent. Freud (1946) already noticed that our modern Western culture is steeped with the idea that childhood is a precarious developmental phase, a period of time necessarily devoid of carnal knowledge. Sex with children interferes with the uniqueness of being a 'child'.

It is quite possible that the fear of paedophilia is a spurious relation and that the anguish over the inner life of children is of more importance. Their libinal experiences, often termed polymorphous conduct, remain rather obscure, even for scientists. Following Freud (1946) one could state that children obey the principle of lust. Later on, this candid attitude of affection is forced to incorporate shame. Because of this adjustment, rational control becomes possible and that is when the young person moves into the reality of discipline.<sup>4</sup> But there are many boys and girls who do not accept the temporal register that reduces

<sup>3</sup> Haven't we all lost Maddy McCann in some way with the unexplained disappearance of this little girl, possibly kidnapped while her parents were off dining, in May 2007?

<sup>4</sup> On a more aggregated level Foucault (1978, 103) deals with the micro physics of power, a force producing docile bodies:

Sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely. It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population.

them to asexual creatures who do not yet realize ‘something’ (Bruhm and Hurley 2004). These queer desires and feelings are treated as if they are aberrations, considered a danger for the child and its immediate habitat. Love and sexuality are inscrutable grounds and thus very hard to control in a proactive sense. Therefore, in spite of close monitoring, minors can engage in sexual contact. If they do so, authorities tend to blame the elder person as an intruder taking advantage of the naïve minor. The mature is seen as a thief robbing a phantasmographic infantile core.

It becomes even more confusing when the youngster is not passive at all regarding sexual matters. As a mechanism of negating the language of childhood sexuality, this ‘disturbance’ is replied to with the interpretive notion of the temporal, viewed as a silly rite of passage (Ohi 2004). His/her ‘queerness’ is incompatible with the future, but is acceptable as long as it stays a part of the distant past. Childhood sexual desires in the present are thus transferred to a comforting future (in retrospect, the child will think differently) or to a closed past (the anterior future where childish fantasies and fairy tales belong). If that does not work, the only thing left to do is to victimize; making the child irresponsible and ignoring its feelings, deemed far too premature to take into serious account. When a youngster claims the sexual contact was consensual and imbedded in a relationship of affection, authorities have a propensity to validate such feelings as a Stockholm syndrome. Furthermore, if children take a proactive stance regarding sexual manners it is quite possible that authorities view it as a symptom of underlying psychosocial problems. Hence, the uninhibited sexual conduct of minors can be medicalized when it doesn’t fit the cliché of passiveness. This type of narrative makes non-coercive consent suspect per se. Regardless of personal feelings at the time, subsequent traumas are seen as unavoidable for someone at a less mature stage of life engaging in sex (Gooren 2009).

The reason we need authorities governing the vice of childhood sexuality is because almost every child engages in sexual conduct, while at the same time this behavior is seen as inappropriate and unnatural. Children are valued as ‘pre-sexual’ creatures who move on a dividing line, a dangerous border that has to be monitored. Sex and risk are played out on the site of children’s bodies and minds. Because these bodies are ‘unfinished’ and particularly unruly, they are in the need of protection (Brownlie 2001). There is this constant menace that keeps professionals and laymen busy; parents, families, guardians, doctors and psychologists are the primary agents for neutralizing this omnipresent threat (see Foucault 1978). Viewed more closely, childhood sexuality and child abuse are typically ‘modern problems’; in previous times children (‘little people’) moved in the same social spheres as adults and on a physical level, they kept far more multiform contacts with older people (Killias 2000). As Western society became more complex it took longer to transfer knowledge and experience. That is when emotional and sexual maturation became postponed and repressed. A distinct period of protectionism emerged; young people become a specific niche and are placed in social quarantine ever since. This relatively recent social construction of childhood restrains the freedom youngsters had in previous decades and centuries. The family represents the safe haven of protection, but at the same time it carries out intensive control:

Childhood is seen as being at risk from pressures towards early maturity, conspicuous consumption and precocious sexuality (as well as any experience of pain, suffering or loss), highlighting a fundamental contradiction in discourses around children and childhood: childhood is regarded as a natural state and yet also a perpetually at risk (Scott et al. 1998, 696).

Grown-ups get uncomfortable with the idea that children lose their (sexual) innocence at too young an age. The concern for the potential loss of the highly valued period of childhood, at least in modern Western culture, goes hand in hand with an increase of protection measures that cause a lessening of the playful autonomy of the child. That is why Scott et al. (1998) observe that childhood is the only form of social subordination that can be equated with a state of freedom. A by-product of the guardianship and the containment of childhood innocence, as such a scarcity value, is a growing pervasiveness of youth captivity. Nowadays, minors have less mobility in that their freedom suffers from serious erosion (Brownlie 2001). Now, being a responsible parent equals the paranoia supervision of offspring; preventing and detecting antisocial activities such as smoking, drinking and sex is of outmost importance for any guardian in charge. Of course the commercial sector is there to provide the necessary technological aid: bugging children's telephones, installing secret cameras in children's bedrooms, or implanting tracking devices in children's clothes are useful in the modified task of good parenting. In today's climate, child protection services create ever more 'guidelines' for raising children; for official agencies it is now common sense that a child under 12 years of age should not be left alone 20–30 min (see Furedi 2001).

To a certain extent, immaturity among children is a biological fact. However, the symbolic performance of 'child innocence' is of immense importance in terms of how to understand the way this specific phase is valued. According to Pratt (2005, 269), 'amidst the erosion of certainty and security elsewhere in the social fabric it is as if children have been invested with even more profound emotional and moral significance... One can argue that the separation of biological and social maturation is the crux of the matter when it comes to conflicts between generations and is essential in understanding why romantic intimacy between young and old is such a tricky business (Sax 1992). Transgression from the realm of childhood into the murky territories of maturity happens at precisely that moment when someone crosses the culturally heavily guarded frontier by acting sexually (Walkerline 1999). By symbolizing the child as vulnerable and sacred, and utilizing it as a functional category, it cannot but attract its antithesis. However, it is misleading to ascribe sexual activity with youngsters solely to adult males (or paedophiles for that matter), many teenagers engage in consensual sexual conduct among peers and by doing so they themselves turn their presumed asexuality into sexuality.

### The Paedophile as Predator

The danger lies within the marginalized sex deviant. In the United States the term Child-Sexual-Abuse (CSA) is used to cover a whole range of unrelated behaviour (for the inflated definition of 'abuse' see Furedi 2006). The unsophisticated application of this label is interesting on the level of semantics and is typical for the discourse surrounding inter-generational intimacy (Southwell 2003; Faller 2004; Green 2006). With regard to those fundamental areas of life where erotic feelings and sexual experiences come to the fore, there is virtually no transparency between generations. Generations tend not to mingle and are thus disharmonious fragmented. It is only when the negative implications of sex at a young age are to be uncovered, such as abuse or teenage pregnancy for that matter, that grown-ups employ interest in the combination of youth and sexuality.

Affairs concerning this explosive mixture tend to attract media attention when something malevolent has happened; something horrible performed by a child molester, a child rapist or a child murderer. People incite the discourse (see Foucault 1978) at those moments when the experiences of child sexuality are evidently negative and unpleasant.

The label 'paedophile' is inextricably linked with the theme of sexual abuse (Jenkins 1998). Within the public imagination the paedophile is a sexual beast, a predator hunting in parents' nightmares with the objective of taking away their infants. Our culture considers sex with children worse than murder and manslaughter; a sexual child is no longer a child, it loses its existential status of pure and innocent. The child is 'dead' and becomes like one of us adult sinners. By way of tackling this defeat, groups and societies search for a totem to grasp: a symbol of evil. At that point, those with a paedophilic master status function as a relieving catharsis (Ippel 1999; Evans 2003; Pratt 2005).

All sinister connotations with respect to paedophilia have led to a host of horror stories and urban myths. A popular 'script' in the 1990s figured clans of Satan worshippers. Lost children were supposed to be randomly abducted in broad daylight, thereafter presumed to be engaged in sadistic gang bangs and finally assumed to be sacrificed via occult rituals. These terrible acts were seen as the *modus operandi* of dangerous paedophilic rings. In The Netherlands everyone is familiar with the salient 'Oude Pekela-gate'; clowns were seen as the bogey men who lured and drugged local children. Despite the media hype and the speculations, tangible evidence was entirely absent (apart from a single clown's suit on a nearby rubbish-dump). In line with these types of stories are alleged conspiracies in the shadowy 'industry of child pornography'. Related to this is the Dutroux affair: a Belgian sex-murderer convicted of having kidnapped, tortured and sexually abused six girls during 1995 and 1996. His crimes were presumed to be just a small tip of the iceberg; a massive interconnected network of the country's political and industrial elite was thought to play a major role in profiting from an industry of sexual child abuse.

Another example is the frightening image of the Internet; a virtual space expanding the hunting field of paedophiles from deserted parks to the digital highway. It is there where obscene material circulates and children are tricked into making sexual contact or performing sexual acts in front of their web cam. The publicity about these 'online predators' is again exaggerated and largely inaccurate, a recent study (Wolak et al. 2008) shows interactions via Internet do not fit the model of forcible sexual assault, but are mostly based on the development of relationships. The aim of this folklore idiom, with the paedophile as the lead star, is not to take tensions and fear away, but to arouse and fuel it (Kincaid 1992, 1998). It is the adrenaline we long for, because of that, fear is not allowed to be taken away in our popular climate. Therefore, we rely on myths of sexual maniacs that, by talking about it over and over again, reinforce clear dichotomies. The many news bulletins, newspaper headlines, talk-shows, (auto) biographical novels and movies that take sexual abuse as a selling issue are illustrative.

When analyzing the wider ramifications of the menace of sexuality for the innocence of childhood and using cultural criminology it is also relevant how deviant sexual behavior is consumed by our society of spectators. Sexual deviants and their peripheral behavior is devoured by means of infotainment through various forms of media. What is rejected gets consumed en masse in order to spice up daily life; an everyday life that is less spectacular, more flat and rather monotonous. Besides the inherent entertainment value, we consume to buy our own self-righteousness and holiness (Kincaid 1992, 1998; Schofield 2004). Legends are there to protect its producers; they free themselves by not playing a part in particular narratives. Nobody asks the fundamental question why child sexuality has such a magnetic quality. There is a tacit consensus that the theme under discussion can never leave the form of a shocking anecdote. Historical, sociological and literary lines of approach could destabilize the premises with regard to sexually active children and potential abuse (Kincaid 1998; McCreery 2004). Kincaid (1998) compares the dominant narrative of child abuse in our culture with that of a Gothic universe, a morbid fairy tail

that reassures us we are not complicit. In late modern society the paedophile plays the Big Bad Wolf whom we as Hunters/Woodsmen have to eliminate so Little Red Riding Hood can make a safe journey whenever visiting Grandma.<sup>5</sup> To focus on these scapegoats is a cultural quest, a way of denying having any complicit part in the discourse of CSA.

However, the complicity is furtive and consists of a particular deadlock; late modern Western culture is entrapped in a state of schizophrenia, because it sexualizes children and simultaneously denies it is doing so. Stories of molestation, incest, abduction and child pornography are fascinating precisely because they refer to the 'erotic child'. The omnipresent 'sexual danger' vision towards children makes us to a certain extent uncomfortable; it brings and keeps children in danger. Freud (1946) remarked that those who are in a state of neurotic fear are most dreadful of the excessive demands of their own libido. The fearful and hostile reactions towards someone with a disposition to paedophilia can be characterized as a way of overcompensation. The heavy denunciation of this evil facilitates the projection of latent cultural unease. The ones responsible for child abuse do not fit the archetype of the socially incompetent dirty old man; it can be anybody: (grand) parents, (gym) teachers, priests, teenagers or even children themselves.<sup>6</sup> Sexual interest in children appears to be present in all ranks. On a wider scale, in our cultural practices we can witness a process of eroticizing that which is young and innocent; the discourse of childlike innocence is responsible for such a complex phenomenon as nymph attraction (Mohr 2004).

## **Eroticizing the Child: Obscuring the Dichotomies**

### Innocence and Erotica Overlapping

The explosive cocktail of innocence/purity and sex appeal/irrepressible allure is what makes modern perceptions towards children so unmanageable and confusing. A child is the incarnation of all those forms which are desirable in our world: sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous and mischievous. In what we regard as sexually arousing we are culturally instructed to find/create it in the vacuum, to see the erotic in what can be smothered, the blank page that can easily be overwritten. 'Cute' innocence attracts guilt and is therefore always in danger of becoming 'vamp like' sexy (Kincaid 1998).

The outwards appearance of the suppression of child sexuality leads, in a paradoxical fashion, to the sexualization of suppression. On a more perverse level, the characterization of the child as vulnerable and needy and the maintenance of its naiveté and ignorance has erotic implications. The official injunction is that adults cannot have sex with youngsters who are seen as sexual innocent. Nevertheless, Millett (1984) traces an unofficial line: maidens, youth and the blush of virgins are fair game after all. As a practice, the courting of youth, the helpless, the vulnerable, the innocent and the ignorant are as old as the bible. People in a less advantaged position, the structural underprivileged imbedding of children in society is obvious here, can be seduced with a power linked to gallantry. So, we are burdened with a culture that sexualizes children, while at the same time preaching divine innocence with respect to minors:

<sup>5</sup> Fromms (1980) dissection of classic fairy tails and the cultural significance of these archetypal narratives is instructive here.

<sup>6</sup> For the implausibility of containing fear by a clear morphology of evil with respect to *the* sexual child abuser, see Meyer (2007).

I am not saying the solution came first, that we invented child molesting in order to talk about child sex. But I think the reverse causality, that the existence of child molesting necessitated the talk about it, is just as suspect. The problem and the cure are happily married; it doesn't matter who proposed to whom, they came into being together, made for each other (Kincaid 1998, 260–261).

### The Commercial Lifestyle/Entertainment Industry

With the introduction of television children have started to behave more and more like grown-ups. In the visual media and other platforms kids are supposed to behave in a precocious way. Is it not remarkable why moms put their daughters on stage for something like beauty pageant contests? Ambivalence regarding phantasmographic 'Lolitas', the ambiguous interplay of manipulation, is a force of attraction for those males who are caught off their guard in dealing with precocious children. The many pornographic websites dealing with 'barely legal'/teenage fantasies' videos and photos complete with images that contain scenes of naughty girls (dressed in school uniform, with two pigtailed and accompanied by a lollipop) who 'have to stay in after school' and 'receive punishment' is a proof of that alluring borderline availability.<sup>7</sup>

The sexual gaze towards girlhood is not a marginal or an exceptional phenomenon; as stated above, innocence and sexuality coincide strongly in our culture. Apparently, all that is condemned as deviant and fought publicly is a source of excitement in a more private setting; safely at home behind the personal computer. For a society that considers sex with children absolutely pernicious it is ambiguous how one might value prepubescent girls in the before-mentioned beauty pageant contests<sup>8</sup> or in commercial advertisement strategies that entice the mature by framing young people as evocative. Conversely, these types of images in which 'youngness' and 'freshness' becomes sexualized, enhance the sexuality of youth. Some authors (Merskin 2004) label this as corporate paedophilia: the sexualization of the child whose childhood is brought into action to make profit.

Bauman (2003, 57) directs attention to the broader hegemony of hedonistic consuming over ascetic production:

After the era in which sexual energy had to be sublimated in order to keep the car assembly line moving came an era when sexual energy needed to be beefed up, given freedom to select any channel of discharge at hand and encouraged to go rampant, so that the cars leaving the assembly line might be lusted after as sexual objects.

Sex is a lucrative product and, even more important, a pervasive byproduct that can be marketed on a global scale. In such an economy children and teenagers are themselves commodities<sup>9</sup>; this is bluntly illustrated by child prostitution in Third World countries but also apparent in numerous and often controversial adds of fashion companies. In the

<sup>7</sup> For pornography on the internet such an allure is also relevant with respect to the intergenerational taboo resting on boys having sex with older women. More specifically 'sons' having sex with 'mothers', thus evoking an incestuous dimension. Pornographic genres dealing with this taboo are popularly referred to as *MILF* ('Mother(s) I'd like to fuck') or *Cougar* ('A woman of middle age who actively seeks the casual companionship of younger males').

<sup>8</sup> For a brilliant parody and cultural critique addressing the grotesqueness of these shows see the movie *Little Miss Sunshine*.

<sup>9</sup> Besides the role of supplying sexual services and goods, young people are also the consumers of sexuality; products that take various forms in our popular culture, ranging from Barbie dolls that convey a particular aesthetic ideal for little girls to the naughty teen idol Britney Spears turning on a teen public (Levine 2002).



fashion industry models are purposefully selected for their embodiment of preadolescent mystique. Supermodels such as Twiggy and Kate Moss were still adolescents (respectively, 16 and 14 years of age) when they were ‘discovered’, they had remarkable androgynous features that made them alluring. One could say it is exactly innocence and naivety that makes a lot of teenage fashion/pop stars sexually attractive. So, despite the overt propagation that sexuality belongs to the domain of the mature, in popular culture we witness a process wherein the developmental phase of young girls becomes smothered with erotica. Commercial life exploits the expression of young girls; coquettishly posed nymphs perform an ambivalent role within this industry of enticement. There are many degrees in which youthfulness can be marketed as sexual and consumer lust can be made dependent on naiveté.

Contrary to the previously mentioned trend of ‘dressing up’ little children, there is a ‘dressing down’ trend to discern. Youthful looks are not limited to minors; everything shifts to the desired state of youngness. Plastic surgery is major business and is aimed at reinstating the divines of everlasting youth. Becoming older and having chiseled features is starting to have a taboo quality. Having the smooth and hairless skin of a preadolescent is regarded as an attractive mark.<sup>10</sup> The combination of childish smoothness and mature sexual characteristics is unsettling and can be held accountable for undermining the prohibition when it comes to converging sexuality and minors. On a macro level there seems to be a progression towards wide scale *infantilization*, which, in a paradoxical way, makes the construction ‘youth hood’ fade away as a moral compass in a world that navigates along the lines of generation cohorts. The focus on sexual child abusers is a manoeuvre to keep the ‘child’ visible and guard the ‘child’ from total disappearance:

... in all societies, purity and danger are important symbols and are linked symbiotically. That which is ‘pure’ not only conveys a sense of order and rightfulness, but it also draws attention to the menace of the pollutants to it. Impurities, pollutants and abuses, then, are ways of organizing a society’s borders (Pratt 2005, 266).

### The Blurring of Mature/Immature as a Consequence of Technology

Without a doubt, not many parents would openly claim that their child is a sexual being, being an interactive subject in the know-how of eroticism. There is an ever growing need to mark borders and keep the ranks closed when it concerns the distinction between ‘young’ and ‘old(er)’. At the same time the ontological division of the mature and immature becomes more and more blurred. Some authors claim the distinct phase termed ‘childhood’ already disappeared at the moment the telegraph was discovered. If the mass media are capable of revealing every sexual secret to any age-group, then the foundation for the split of these spheres is lost. According to this thinking, there is no such thing as

<sup>10</sup> There are possibilities to whet ones appetite in a socially acceptable way without the immediate paedophilic connection whenever it involves real children. Here, the child-wife enters. An example is the orchestrated tour de homage for sportswomen who have won Olympic medals. Proud and enthusiastic audiences come for more than just the viewing of medals:

In the female athletes, we are told, America “glorifies a hyper-niche body type.” And what type is that? Well, it falls in a “specific lacuna between girl and woman.” And what are the specifics of this lacuna and what is the source of “mystery” that gives these females a porn-star quality? Well, petite bodies are part of it, but the main explanation is that in these females’ bodies “years of intense training suppress oestrogen production, delaying puberty and causing 18- and 19- year-olds to look and sound like 12-year-olds.” In other words these petite females are “street legal” prepubescent girls. America could have sex with these girls (Bruhm and Hurley 2004, 29).

childhood when fundamental secrets are absent. With Internet as the prime source of unfiltered information, there are now all kinds of unofficial and anarchistic spaces where young people obtain or gather to exchange implicit and explicit erotic data.

Once, the wall that stood between the legally defined minor and the sexual world that belonged to the mature seemed solid, now it has fallen into irreparable decay. The important concept of 'sexuality' is no longer capable of doing the ontological task of segregating generations, therefore this pivotal center can no longer hold. By exclusively searching for the responsible vandals in paedophilic circles, we miss the crucial point that the medium of technology itself is to a certain extent to blame for the erosion of a clear demarcation, since the consequence is that today youngsters become sexual subjects through knowledge and experience by means of a largely unregulated cyberspace.

### The Fight Against Child Pornography

It would be absurd to ascribe the negation of the presumed asexuality in youngsters solely to paedophiles. Although the paedophile is blamed to be obsessive when it comes to sexual interest in a youngster, this also holds true for those who react in a furious manner in dealing with the mixture children and sex. Revealing is the discussion of what can be accounted 'child pornography', more and more is included. Such as the production of child pornography by youngster themselves, referred to as 'sexthing' (see Goldstein 2009) and even the virtual format is now punishable in many Western countries (in such a simulacrum the child becomes a metaphorical symbol *par excellence*), one becomes aware of this dialectic. Constructing stricter and harsher laws on child pornography is a part of larger process that makes our gaze towards children ever more sexual. A child pictured as a sexual victim rather than a sexual siren nevertheless reinforces the child as a sexual creature. Elaborate discussions and intricate analyses of what to regard as 'sexual coyness' (the potential to arouse) not only preserves but multiplies and enhances the sexuality of children. Detailed and very often bizarre descriptions of what counts as illegal child pornography summons a problem intrinsic in censorship laws. That is: language can perpetuate the very thing it seeks to undo. Regardless of its criminalizing intentions, a space is created where children and sex are bound together. (Adler 2001).<sup>11</sup>

One can draw an interesting parallel with the criminalization of sub cultural (youth) styles. Ferrell and Saunders (1995, 6) state that 'while this criminalization of group style may, in essence, constitute a simple-minded attempt to stamp out dissenting groups and acts by denying the display of membership symbols, its ironic consequence is often the amplification of these symbols' stylistic power ...' Viewing social reality with sexually tinted spectacles makes ever more poses and settings something maliciously erotic (Schuijjer 1997; Mohr 2004; Furedi 2006). In this hypersexual world visual material containing innocent images of children become something pornographic in a split second. Child pornography is indeed a fetish for both the enforced and the enforcers. Interest and concern for the sexual has the highest magnitude whenever the degree of enforcement is most fierce. There is a secret alliance between punishment and transgression; the two are made for each other. They foster perpetual spirals of power and pleasure. Illegality is a device of sexual saturation, it is beneficial in producing and consolidating a sexual mosaic. That is why Foucault (1978, 47) is not in favor of the one-dimensional repression hypothesis; power is not aimed at constructing boundaries for the guaranty of 'healthy'

<sup>11</sup> The collusion also holds true for an academic and reflexive article like this one. By addressing the above stated complicity children become nevertheless sexualized and thus viewed as such.

sexual procreation, ‘modern society is perverse, not in spite of its puritanism or as if from a backlash provoked by its hypocrisy; it is in actual fact, and directly, perverse...’

### Sexual Identity Politics

It is very convenient to marginalize this constellation and to ascribe the predicament to a specific category of sick people. Yet, peace will not be restored because this ‘specie’ cannot be ‘othered’ in an orderly fashion. This failure points to the epistemological borders of constructing a solid sexual identity. According to Weeks (2003) no identity is as paradoxical as a *sexual* identity. One presupposes a fixated and uniform essence, in reality it is a precarious construction. Sexuality is something that is extremely diverse, not clearly fixated, and based on difference. Moreover, while an identity is considered a deeply personal choice, at the same time it is also an important signal in marking to which social group a person wants, or does not want, to belong. In times like these, when (sexual) identities are much more precarious and the search for a quintessence becomes obsolete, people cling to a robust antitype.

Unlike the authoritative criteria of DSM<sup>12</sup> suggest, everyone has more in common with (sexual) pathological categories than is openly acknowledged and admitted. In reacting extremely negatively towards intergenerational intimacy this ambiguity becomes clear (Angelides 2004b; Maruna and Matraverse 2004). If a homophobe heterosexual has a percentage of homophile tendencies, one could state that when that percentage is high and the socially demanded repression of these urges costs more energy, the overtly expressed aversion against homosexuality becomes far more furious and emotional. In a similar way, this argument holds true for the physical attraction towards children in general, and at the same time for the taboo that rests on giving in (Brongersma 1979).

The emergence of ‘the paedophile/pederast’ can be described as a useful identity category for the displacement of anxieties of manhood. By marginalizing this erotic preference, instead of seeing it as a problem congruous with dominant forms of male sexuality, the severed masculine hegemony can be restored (Angelides 2005). Moreover, research constantly shows that incestuous acts can happen in all sorts of families and because of its universal occurrence, the family, as a key institution, is something inherently dysfunctional for many. By locating the thread of sexual abuse outside our homes, the family can be saved from fundamental critical review.

Mass media portray paedophilia as if it were a perverse peripheral phenomenon. However, paedophiles are in a Freudian sense utterly ‘Unheimlich’, because they reveal hidden neuroses in the human being and his culture, that is: an awkward feeling that stirs up reminders and recollections. Therefore, it is uncanny: it touches upon primitive elements hiding in the unconsciousness. In reality, sex with children is much more complex and much more uncomfortable than clear representations in the media make us believe.

### Within the Family

Parenting is not exempt from erotic mutuality. Child sexuality is to be located very early on; the infant experiences pleasant bodily sensations from the caregiver. This is replied to with the infantile language of tenderness. Because the caregiver is not always present, babies incorporate skills which give them a pleasant feeling in the temporal absence of

<sup>12</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is an American handbook for mental health professionals that lists different categories of mental disorders and the criteria for diagnosing them.

external stimulation. Subsequently, there is no such thing as an unmarked period of time or an asexual blank slate. The first experiences of pleasure are already marked by fantasies inherent to the presence of the mother and the father. That makes the first object choice incestuous; by externalization, these desires become acceptable later on in life. However, all later choices remain somehow based on the parental prototypes. According to the 'enigmatic signifier' theory of Jean Laplanche, the child is seduced by the mother, more particular by her total persona and thus also by her sexuality (Angelides 2003). It is difficult to acknowledge this openly, however, in the unconsciousness there remains a reservoir of full sensual love between parents and their children. Unavoidably, parents have to live up to restrictions, adapting to the wishes of the child, and perhaps more importantly, society.

The irrational anger and hate towards paedophiles has to arise from something that is much closer to us than we dare to admit publicly. What the constellation of parenthood clarifies is that not all incestuous desires emanate from the oedipal deadlock of the child; caregivers structure their relationship in a similar fashion. Mutual psychological traumas and conflicts are inevitable aspects in the evoking process that centers on the child. Erotic desire from/of children is everywhere and cannot be successfully 'othered' to the sexual deviant. The out-of-proportion protection of artificial asexuality in the 'child', and the lynching of a small sub-group as the main source of danger, appears as a defense mechanism for the control of deeply imbedded fears. As long as erotica and youth, in connection with an incomprehensible intimate desire for children, falls under the exclusive heading of *sexual child abuse*, a constructive confrontation is ruled out per definition.

## Conclusion

The which-hunt that has befallen the PCFD, in the sociology of deviance termed 'moral panic,' is chosen here to elucidate the uncomfortable deadlock in our late modern culture, an impasse the paedophile lays bare as a catalytic agent. With the deconstruction of the 'Unheimlich' feeling people experience whenever a 'paedophilic play' is staged, we encountered some painful areas. Of importance is the hypocrisy in an 'anti-paedo' spirit of our age. This is an era in which the 'child' and youthfulness is sexualized as it were a normal form of aesthetic functioning; at the same time this contribution is redeemed by means of a simplistic mechanism of scapegoating that puts to blame the pathological individual.

In analyzing discomfort in relation to sex with children, a hypocritical (popular) culture becomes manifest. Hysteria and hypocrisy go hand in hand. Greer and Jewkes (2005, 29) put forward two important questions with regard to this cultural hypocrisy. Why do we keep holding onto the idea of 'stranger danger' as the number one menace to children? We do this despite the known fact that sexual child abuse is mostly accountable to the familiar. And, why did our culture 'invent' the paedophile at a time when the sexualization of children, coupled with the cross-fertilization of childish expression and mature sexuality, took an accelerating pace?

Paedophiles lend themselves as a 'suitable enemy' for the projection of hidden desire; by isolating them it becomes possible to disown our own shadow (Maruna and Matraverse 2004). It is *the paedophile* who triggers and reactivates the traumatic origin of repressed material. Angelides (2003) remarks there is a dual identification at the moment we are dealing with a paedophilic spectacle; the intergenerational aggressor incites associations of ourselves *as* children (the incestuous desires stemming from the Oedipus complex) and

simultaneously it calls into question the relation we have *with* children (the mysterious seduction of the parents). Because of their blatant intergenerational erotica excursions, paedophiles are uncanny nomads who unleash an existential crisis on society. But, on whatever level, one becomes aware of an omnipresent non-coherent aversion against sexual intimacy with children. By evoking a false binary opposition, attention is deflected away from ourselves.

As criminologists we need to be aware that there are some omnipresent misunderstandings with regard to the sexual menace for children. Uninformed hysteria should be counteracted with informed nuance so the real damage and harm of sexual abuse can be addressed and sanctioned more properly. Next to the misleading figure of the paedophile the mix-up is partly fueled by the unproblematized use of the term ‘child’ and the pre-supposed harm of any sexual activity. It would be much more useful to make a distinction between prepubescent children and adolescents. The latter should not be treated a priori as asexual and it should be openly acknowledged that this category can engage in autonomous sexual expression. Hence, for these minors the presence of sexuality as an external and alien force penetrating their sexual innocence is inaccurate. For that reason, future directions for research should deal with the immediate *Lebenswelt* of teenagers and the way they handle themselves as sexual subjects as well as sexual objects in our highly sexualized Western society/culture in which they partake.

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