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THE NATURE OF CHILDHOOD THROUGH HISTORY REVEALED IN ARTWORKS?

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Several authors have used artworks to interpret the nature of childhood in various historical periods. This contribution argues that artworks are of limited value in illuminating societies' attitudes towards children as well as the psychic realities and social experiences of children themselves. In particular, visual artworks suffer from ambivalent interpretation (both of subject matter and its expression) due to influences that are independent of its subject matter. Influences include: the vagaries of artistic developments, conventions, style, tastes, fashions, markets and patronage; physical factors such as the techniques, materials and technologies available, the division of labour, studio practices and the number of sittings available; the unpredictable nature of creativity; interpretations of viewers and 'adults'; and the capacity of artworks to change social reality. It is concluded that psychosocial inferences about history based on artworks alone involve a category mistake and that the use of art as evidence for the nature of childhood is largely a matter of risky inference.

British artist Thomas Gainsborough's portraits of his daughters, Mary and Margaret, *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly* (see Figure 1) and *The Painter's Daughters With a Cat* (see Figure 2), are described as 'two of the loveliest paintings of children in all art' (Leonard, 1972: 51). Produced in the late 1750s, they represent a kind of depiction of childhood that had never been seen before (Crown, 1984). When contrasted with the stiffly and formally posed groups of the past, they seem to provide evidence for the theses that children were newly regarded as a special category of human development and were newly valued in the late 18th century. As opposed to the murder, abandonment, abuse or indifference that was hitherto seen to be their lot (Ariès, 1962; de Mause, 1988), such paintings of children in friendly and

playful postures *prima facie* confirm that nurturing attitudes towards children had become the norm (Crown, 1984).

Several psychohistorians including Philippe Ariès, Lloyd de Mause, J.H. Plumb and Simon Schama have used or support the use of visual artworks to illuminate the character of a society, its attitude towards children, and/or the psychic realities and social experiences of children themselves. The extent to which psychohistoriography is a new mode of analysis that arrived in the later 20th century, distinct from conventional western historiography, including the sociological uses of texts, is contentious (see Ebel, 1987) and outside this article's scope. The present concern is with refuting all discourses that fail to question the validity of such documentary use of artworks. Aligned with the negative findings of Francis Haskell, Ludmilla Jordanova and Adrian Wilson, this article demonstrates that art-texts alone are of very limited use in justifying historical, psychological and sociological conclusions.

Interpretive 'slippage' and interpretive plurality

The problem of interpreting art as historical evidence is largely an ontological one. The ontology of artworks is an expansive philosophical topic dealing with the kind(s) of existence possessed by artworks (Wolterstorff, 1992). Relevant issues include representational properties ascribed to physical objects; how we identify the shapes or forms whose arrangements we analyse; whether artworks are constituted predominantly by the mental or the physical or whether they are constructs of the mind; the eliminability or inexhaustibility of interpretation; and the mediation of artist and audience in creating a work of art (Wollheim, 1980). A questionable ontological assumption of some prominent psychohistoriographical discourses is the equation of pictorial representation of childhood with actual childhood. The error consists in mistaking artworks for life and constructing fictional pictures of childhood, as though one could know what really happened in the 18th-century English home by looking at paintings of Gainsborough's daughters (to paraphrase de Mause, 1988). Moreover, the ontological ambiguity inherent in artworks gives rise to interpretive plurality. For example, Ariès (1962) interprets medieval art until the 13th century as lacking in child morphology, while de Mause (1988) holds that medieval art represents children realistically. Aside from the possibility that Ariès and de Mause are selecting different evidence, the nature of art virtually precludes a reconciliation of interpretations.

Such interpretive 'slippage' and plurality of readings is part of a larger hermeneutic problem of using any kind of text – whether visual images, apprenticeship records, court cases and records of founding hospitals – to infer psychological motivations and attitudes and attribute these to earlier societies. The difficulties in using art for psychohistorical inference is a

component of this wider debate. Following Jordanova (1990), we can never take for granted the independent ‘reality’ of whatever it is that a painting depicts.

Category mistake

The following section demonstrates this category mistake (mistaking artworks for life) and concludes that inferences about the nature of childhood through history based on artworks alone are extremely risky. The main reason for this negative finding is ambivalent interpretation (both of subject matter and its expression) due to: the impossibility and/or undesirability of accessing artists’ intentions; the vagaries of artistic developments, practices and conventions, styles, taste, fashions, markets and patronage; the unpredictable nature of creativity; the unpredictability of viewers’ interpretations and, finally, the capacity of artworks to create rather than simply reflect social reality. It is concluded that evidence independent of the subject matter and evidence concerning the nature of art is needed.

Ambivalent interpretation

The necessity for such additional evidence becomes apparent when historiographical discrepancies such as the following are detected: Lyman (1988: 78) describes an illustration for Psalm 50 from the Utrecht Psalter (Reims c. 820) as relatively ‘promising’ evidence because it ‘seems rather clearly to show a naked child held by one adult, buttocks up, for another who will administer a spanking. The two adults are turned to hear a shepherd, speaking verse 17 (“you hate discipline”) or perhaps 21 (“I will correct you”)’ (Lyman, 1988: 78). A perusal of the illustration in the book to which Lyman (1988) refers, Beckwith’s (1964) *Early Medieval Art*, reveals an archaeological volte-face: the supposed child is described by Beckwith on the opposite page as ‘a ewe-lamb’: ‘the rich man is standing beside his sheep and cattle [construed by Lyman as the verse-speaking shepherd] and is directing his servant [construed by Lyman as the one who will administer a spanking] to take away the ewe-lamb [for Lyman, a naked child held by one adult, buttocks up] from the poor man [the one adult], who is seated before a building to the right’ (Beckwith, 1964: 47). Ironically, it is Lyman (1988: 80) himself who cautions that ‘Searchers [of the history of childhood] should avoid pre-judgements about the utility of sources’.

Another example of evidence which lends itself to ambivalent interpretation in a slightly different way is Gainsborough’s portraits of his daughters, described by Leonard (1972: 51) as ‘solemn and unsmiling’. Viewing these two paintings (see Figures 1 and 2), it is possible to argue that the children are in fact smiling in *Chasing a Butterfly*, and merely day-dreaming in *With a Cat*. Indeed, another source describes them as ‘enjoying what was



Figure 1 *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, Thomas Gainsborough ©The National Gallery, London

and is thought of as a “natural” childhood, surrounded by the evidence of parental care, fenced off from certain kinds of painful experiences, in an arena of innocence and therefore of happiness’ (Crown, 1984: 159). Prima facie, the interpretation that they are ‘solemn and unsmiling’ carries more weight when Leonard (1972: 51) informs us that:

The daughters . . . were troubled girls who grew to be unstable women. Margaret behaved erratically. She was an excellent harpsichordist, and after her father became famous, word of her talent reached Queen Charlotte, who expressed an interest in hearing her play. For no apparent reason Margaret flew into a temper at the royal request and refused. Mary married a musician friend of her father’s, but they parted, and she later went insane.



Figure 2 *The Painter's Daughters With a Cat*, Thomas Gainsborough ©The National Gallery, London

Leonard (1972) makes several questionable assumptions. First, there is the psychological assumption that a child's angry refusal to comply with a royal request betokens pathology. Margaret's reaction may be interpreted alternatively as a rational response to being treated 'as if poor children had been made only to amuse the adults, like little dogs or little monkeys', as 17th-century moralist and pedagogue, Fleury, put it (Ariès, 1962: 131). Second, there are unstated assumptions about the psychic realities of Margaret and Mary and their experience of childhood, based on the evidence that the

paintings are thought to provide. Stated, they might be: 'The paintings show "solemn and unsmiling" children, therefore the children were pathological. We know that the children were pathological because they grew to be pathological adults.' Even if the initial premise, that the portraits are 'solemn and unsmiling' is true, the argument begs the question: 'Margaret and Mary were "troubled", "unstable", "erratic" and "insane" adults, therefore they must have been pathological as children. We know that they were pathological children because their father's paintings show early warning signs of their pathologies ("solemn and unsmiling").' Committing a blatant category error, Leonard is basing his interpretation of the paintings on evidence independent of the paintings' subject matter, namely the life histories of Gainsborough's daughters; then he is using the paintings to project into their futures. One wonders whether he would have described them as 'solemn and unsmiling' had he not known that they grew up to be 'pathological' adults. Surely Leonard ought to confine his assumptions to the artworks only. Any other assumptions, such as that their father had premonitions about their insanity and wished to portray it or portrayed it inadvertently, seem too risky to make.

Accessing artists' intentions and attitudes

What *could* possibly settle the matter is knowing what the artist intended to depict. However, in the absence of the artist, it may be argued that the artist's intentions are inaccessible (Beardsley and Wimsatt, 1974). Even if the artists were alive, some argue, it would be impossible to reach into their minds and grasp their intentions. While it is true that the mind is private, opponents of this argument counter that we can in fact know something about artists' intentions. They argue that interpreting artworks is no different from interpreting actions in everyday life (Lyas, 1992). Mental states are accessible because they 'break through' into behaviour. What a painter *does* in a painting is itself a kind of behaviour, a creative or compositional activity. We can ask what Gainsborough makes his daughters *do* in the painting, and how this compares with what he makes them do in other paintings. Knowledge of artists' mental states is therefore the outcome not of a risky inference based on isolated observations but of wider attention to their activities, concerns and behaviours (Taylor, 1989).

However, this argument assumes that artists *possess* an intention or attitude towards their subject matter, an assumption which cannot always be made. They can be attributed with intentions they never had and have effects that they never intended. For example, Crown (1984) contests that 18th-century British artists did not consciously intend to awaken the public to the plight of the beggar children that they depicted in their so-called 'Fancy' pictures (to be discussed later). She charges the artists with indifference, saying that they treated their subjects as mere pictorial paraphernalia. One wonders how much Crown (1984) bases this inference about the artists' attitudes on

the paintings and how much on the information that ‘A child was abandoned on [artist] Reynolds’s own doorstep, and a crowd gathered demanding that she be taken in. He did not do so, but a “passing gentleman” did’ (Crown, 1984: 164). It is possible that Crown is making the same sort of category mistake as Leonard (1972). Equally plausible is the possibility that Reynolds was not indifferent, but philanthropic; yet he felt that his talents disposed him to improve the plight of children through rendering and disseminating knowledge of their miseries in art, rather than through practical aid. This example illustrates a difficulty inherent in using art to infer artists’ intentions and attitudes. Another difficulty arises from the possibility that some artists meant us to be unsure about their intentions (Haskell, 1988). When even the most basic interpretation of a painting’s meaning is open to doubt, it may be asked how it is possible to rely on art as historical evidence (Haskell, 1988). And when an artist’s intentions and attitudes are discoverable, it may be asked how this helps to provide evidence for inferences about *society’s* attitude towards the subject. What does the depiction of Mary and Margaret in floating silk dresses, lightly pursuing a butterfly, really indicate about children’s psychic realities and society’s attitude towards children in the 18th century?

Artistic conventions, style, taste, fashions, markets and patronage

The fact that art is not a historical constant, that it is subject, instead, to influences independent of its subject matter – such as prevailing artistic conventions, style and taste, the market and patronage (Jordanova, 1990) – is one of the main difficulties of interpreting the finished pictures themselves as saying anything about children’s experiences and attitudes towards childhood. The following discussion illustrates some contrary possibilities that need to be considered.

Describing two 18th-century Dutch paintings, Schama (1987: 541) writes: ‘It is the first *sustained* image of parental love that European art has to show us, and that, in itself, is a not unimportant moment in the history of the family’ and ‘It is, surely, a fresh moment in the history of European marriage, this urge to celebrate and cherish the warmth of wedded friendship’ (Schama, 1987: 427). The unstated assumption is that the artworks are reflecting social reality. Yet, as Haskell (1988) points out, it would seem strange to remark of the equally original Dutch scenes of drunken brawls that the artists were indicating a fresh moment in the history of rural relationships. This observation suggests that changes in kinds of depiction may not in fact correspond to changes in social reality, but rather to changes in artistic conventions. Dutch artists were largely responsible for developing the motif of ‘ordinary life’ (Haskell, 1988). From the late 1800s, Dutch artworks began to depict daily occurrences, from sick children being nursed to urinating peasants (Haskell, 1988). Yet the absence of such images in other European art can surely not be taken to mean that Italian and French parents

lacked tenderness towards their children or that Italian and French peasants refrained from urinating (Haskell, 1988). Thus, the theory that new kinds of depiction reflect new kinds of attitudes does not necessarily hold.

It seems that when what artworks show conflicts with other historical and more factually reliable evidence, even more questionable theories about artists' motivations may be invented to explain the discrepancy. For example, much non-visual evidence has been used to infer that few children were suckled and cared for by their own mothers in the Middle Ages. Most infants were farmed out to wet nurses for anything from 2 to 5 years of age (Ross, 1988). How, then, can we account for the 'obsession' with children and the 'adoring' mother-child relation depicted in medieval Florentine art? A possible theory is that the artists were representing their own fantasies of maternal intimacy, to compensate for the intimacy they never enjoyed (Ross, 1988). A more plausible argument is that artists were simply adhering to artistic conventions. It is well known that the deep spiritual faith in Christian teaching prevented any real separation between secular and religious art (Cornell, 1983). The lack of subject painting and the preponderance of established religious iconography implies that the images were very likely that of the Virgin and Child, rather than secular scenes of everyday intimacy between mother and child.

The extent to which artists are depicting social reality or following genres from previous eras may also be debated. For example, Haskell (1988) points out the possibility that Dutch art depicts, not straightforward scenes of everyday life, but, rather, symbols carrying didactic and moralizing messages, whose meanings would have been recognized in the 17th century but which were subsequently lost. Thus, what is *prima facie* a delightful scene of nursery life could in fact be a symbol of the contending powers of good and evil. If this is the case then our ability to use the artwork as historical evidence is considerably weakened.

A converse case involves attributing an artwork to a particular genre or artistic convention when in fact the artwork is simply a reflection of social reality. Car manufacturer Ettore Bugatti had known Picasso and the other Cubist painters around 1910. Conway (1974) writes that the design of Bugatti's engine blocks and cylinder heads reflected this Cubist influence and were consequently very square-cut and angular. In fact, when asked about the Cubist connection, Ettore's son Roland Bugatti replied that the only reasons their engines were square-cut and angular were that they could afford only simple machines and that it suited the limited skill of the workers that they were able to recruit (Borgeson, 1981: 82). This shows that we cannot always be certain whether artistic conventions or the dictates of ordinary life or social reality, such as economic factors, account for the nature of an artwork.

The market for and patronage of art are additional factors that weaken the link between art and its purported representation of social reality. Often

what the public demands or what is commissioned has no correspondence with the artist's intentions and attitudes, as this anecdote about Russian composer Tchaikovsky shows. In 1881, he was invited to compose an orchestral work for the consecration of the Temple of Christ in Moscow. The solemn *1812* overture was the outcome of this. Tchaikovsky remarked: 'I am dreading this commissioned work. It is cheap and showy as required. At the same time I am working on a serenade for strings in C. The serenade, on the contrary, came from an inner impulse. I cannot wait to complete it' (Brower, 1925: 268). This suggests that artists' intentions and attitudes towards their subject matter affect the quality of their work. This, in turn, will affect the independent 'reality' of which the work is purportedly a portrayal.

Additionally, market demand may work in paradoxical ways, as the following example shows. In the 19th century, when the public was demanding 'shams and ornamental facades', the 1863 Salon jury rejected over 4000 paintings. In response, the rejected artists set up a separate exhibition, the *Salon des Refusés*. The political manoeuvre misfired, though, for the storm of controversy in the press surrounding the rejected, ridiculed works aroused an unprecedented interest (Cornell, 1983). This event emboldened the Impressionists of the 1870s to air their 'common disgust at the Academy's reactionary insistence on the classical tradition' (Cornell, 1983: 355). By the 1970s, art as a category of special objects created for public appreciation was rejected in favour of art as a creative idea which only the artist (supposedly) understands (Cornell, 1983). This reinforces the lack of relationship between art and life.

Physical factors

Other factors which suggest that art is not a historical constant include the techniques, materials and technologies available. For example, 18th-century artists could choose from high finish to thick impasto and bravura, from familiar effects of light to golden memories or fantasies of the Italian sun to project of themselves and their nationality (Haskell, 1988). The introduction of photography in the 1830s and 1840s enabled artists such as Turner, Courbet and Manet to develop variously a new fascination with refracted light, dissolving forms and a lack of interpretation (Cornell, 1983). Undoubtedly there were many 'fresh moments' in art, but their link with artistic developments and conventions is arguably just as strong as or stronger than their link with social developments. As Wilson (1980) states, it is not so much the attitudes of the people at large, but the forms and features of art, which changed. Thus, increasing realism in 18th century art cannot be interpreted to indicate that a correct understanding of the particular nature of childhood had at last been attained.

The division of labour and studio practices, picture size and the number of sittings available (Jordanova, 1990) are further physical factors which insinuate themselves between art and depiction of social reality. For

example, 18th-century British artist Reynolds experienced difficulty locating the beggar children he painted when he wanted them again (Crown, 1984). Conceivably, this could have impacted on the quality of the paintings even more than the artist's desire to place the children, as Crown (1984) puts it, like weeds in placeless environments. The Impressionists' 'studio' practice of painting out of doors in natural light, following their style-merged-with-technique of using broken brushstrokes to depict objects dissolving in light, also impacted on the quality of the artworks. Their intention to reject 'the high moral tone of the academic painters' (Cornell, 1983: 355) and to paint vibrant, bustling, colourful scenes of country pleasure spots necessitated their (lack of) 'studio' practice. We cannot safely infer that French life at the turn of the last century was uniformly the hedonistic paradise that Renoir's *La Grenouillère* (1869), for example, depicts.

The nature of creativity

Other influences on art that are independent of its subject matter were alluded to in the discussion of the possibility of accessing artists' intentions and attitudes. Even if artists deliberately set out to record a change in social attitudes, it may be argued that the final product is mediated by processes beyond the artist's control. First, artists can simply fail in their intentions. Haskell (1988) alludes to this possibility when he observes that it is sometimes claimed that artists went to 'unusual pains' to express some or other feature in their paintings – a bodily attitude or gesture. 'The pains, I am sure, were taken,' writes Haskell (1988: 223) – 'but to what purpose?' Second, if art is, as Beardsley and Wimsatt (1974: 4) describe it, 'the lava of the imagination' then, again, the link between art and its portrayal of social reality is weakened. Arguably artworks can be products of both the imagination and social reality, as these words by 19th-century French artist Daumier show: 'To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch, according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter but a man as well; in short, to create living art – that is my goal' (Cornell, 1983: 345). To extricate the two would be difficult. Third, if it is true that creativity is correlated with 'madness', and that artists have abnormal rates of pathology such as manic depression (Post, 1994), then we can emphatically not use their work as barometers of the prevailing social climate. For example, Marvick (1988: 263) questions one of the stock pieces of evidence of childhood history when he writes that child Louis VIII's doctor, Héroard's 'persistent, intensely manipulative intervention in Louis' early life gave to his *Journal* a pathological character making it unrepresentative of patterns of child care of the time'. Closely related to the 'confounding' factors of imagination and pathology is the virtually undeniable influence of the unconscious. The early 20th-century Surrealist artists, unable to see how the influence of the unconscious mind could be denied, sought to make it an intrinsic component of their work. Facilitated by drugs and seances, they aimed to convey directly

the sensations of dreams and the subconscious mind, ungoverned by reason (Cornell, 1983). By definition, dreams and the unconscious are private, and it is therefore difficult to argue that they reflect social reality.

A corollary to all these various ways in which an artist's intention to depict social reality can misfire, is provided by artists who wish to do anything *but* represent the prevailing social reality. For example, the Dadaists of the early 20th century attempted to take a violently anarchic stance against everything that contemporary culture represented, from reason and reality to rules and taste, as evidenced by the urinals, snow shovels and other ready-made objects that they saw fit to exhibit under preposterous titles in respectable art galleries. Perhaps the Dadaists' artworks, by a process of inversion, are a closer depiction of social reality than are works deliberately intended to depict social reality.

Viewers' interpretations

In addition, viewers of paintings are themselves afflicted by unconscious processes. More likely than not paintings are a springboard for their imagination and projections, rendering interpretation just as much a creative, constructed process as painting. For example, William Blake's poem *Jerusalem* is invariably interpreted in an anachronistic way, as an attack on the values of the Industrial Revolution. Yet the poem cannot possibly be, because Blake wrote the poem *before* the Industrial Revolution had begun (Cioffi, 1974). Thus, it is difficult to control the meaning that viewers, no less historians, will attach to an artwork.

The need for independent evidence

Based on the preceding, visual images alone as a potential source of psychohistorical inference are relatively worthless. Often what (little) artworks show of social reality conflicts with other historical and more factually reliable evidence (Haskell, 1988). Lyman (1988) spells out the choice that social historians face: to accept these limiting conditions or to say nothing at all. An obvious solution is to use as wide a range of evidence as possible, as indeed Schama for example does. Jordanova (1990) recommends supplementing Ariès' selection (pictures, toys, games, costumes, diaries, autobiographies and educational materials) with information about household organization, the family economy, gender and occupational stratification and its relation with other forms of hierarchy in the period. Evidence for this can be acquired from a range of sources, from family correspondence and parish registers (Wilson, 1980) to advertisements, prospectuses, town and country directories, trade cards and handbills (Plumb, 1975). Further information about influences on artistic motivation can be gained from such diverse sources as diaries, biographies, newspapers and other historical artefacts, to handwriting and astrological analyses.

In addition to using a range of different evidence to minimize the limitations which seem to be inherent in any 'massive enterprise' such as Ariès' (1962) *Centuries of Childhood*, or de Mause's (1988) *The History of Childhood*, Walzer (1988: 374) suggests that interpretations must necessarily be 'highly tentative and hypothetical'. Ariès (1962) asserts that children do not appear as children in medieval art, but rather as adults on a reduced scale. Even if Ariès is taking into account all the available evidence, his inference that the idea of childhood did not exist in medieval society can be questioned. Wilson (1980) refutes Ariès interpretation persuasively by arguing that the absence of evidence that Ariès interprets as indifference towards children was in fact nothing more than the absence of direct affirmations of the *modern* attitude towards children. This example shows that a lack of evidence is not *necessarily* evidence of absence. As Jordanova (1990) points out, a lack of evidence ('silences') needs to be interpreted as carefully as statements. While evidence such as visual images, apprenticeship records, court cases and records of foundling hospitals may be used to make relatively confident claims about practices in history, they need to be used with extreme caution to infer motivations and attitudes (Jordanova, 1987).

Artworks' influence on social reality

Perhaps those who take for granted the independent 'reality' of whatever it is that a painting depicts have an image in their minds of artists as journalists, reporters or photographers, forgetting that they are, arguably, first and foremost *creators*. The notion that creators – artists, writers, musicians, scientists, philosophers and other intellectuals – are, like visionaries, 'ahead of their time', is a common discourse. It is a static model that considers only how social reality influences painters, rather than the corresponding impact that artists have on the world – whether intentional or not. As Jordanova (1990) notes, social experiences are transformed as images are produced, sold and displayed. An illustration of artworks' capacity to change social attitudes towards 'children' is provided by Crown's (1984) discussion of the two different types of depiction that appeared in 18th-century England, namely portraiture and the so-called 'Fancy' picture.

Depictions of 'the confident inhabitants of a carefully constructed juvenile paradise' (Crown, 1984: 159), such as Gainsborough's daughters, constitute 'portraiture'; while depictions of children who lived in a melancholy, dark hued, lonely and unprotected world constitute 'Fancy' paintings. The word 'Fancy' referred to the fact that the subject matter conformed to the artist's whim or fancy rather than to established artistic conventions. They were invariably pictures of beggar or cottage children in a 'natural' attitude in some 'placeless' environment, serving the same aesthetic function as trees, hovels and animals. In contrast, the children in the portraiture have their environments arranged around *them*, which Crown (1984) takes to

signify that they were newly regarded as human beings – an assumption which has already been challenged.

Ambivalent attitudes towards children

These Fancy pictures were reviewed controversially at the time. Some rhapsodized about the painterly properties of the Fancy paintings, which suggested a refusal of the 18th-century public to recognize that these were pictures of real, suffering human beings, the products of human control and exploitation. Other critics relinquished poetic distance and allowed the paintings to awaken feelings of empathy for these destitute children. This suggests that there were two very different attitudes towards children, both accepted as 'natural' by the artists and public alike. Crown (1984) avers that a bivalence of attitudes towards children did uneasily exist. Jordanova's (1987) observation that some social groups found child labour more troubling than others supports this. Concurrent with this bivalence was a change in response to the imagery of the Fancy paintings (Crown, 1984). The public began 'reluctantly' to recognize the pathos implicit in the Fancy pictures. Pictorial representation *changed* social attitudes and historical circumstances gave rise to a new set of attitudes and beliefs and a new perception which would become one of the norms of the 19th century (Crown, 1984). Early modern (British and American) men and women altered the forms of their wishes relating to rejection and retention of children, and these adjustments 'wrenched' the fabric of 18th-century western society (Walzer, 1988: 374).

Non-uniform changes in attitudes towards childhood

Although the evidence of clothes, pets, toys, education, sport, music and art suggests that the 'world' of children was more intellectually and emotionally stimulating than previous generations (Plumb, 1975), the extent to which the fabric of 18th-century western society was 'wrenched' may be debated. Crown (1984: 164) disputes the idea that there was a general awakening and submits that these changes were 'only the first inklings of awareness of the authenticity of the experience of children which had traditionally been discarded'. Jenks (1996), too, agrees that it would be a mistake to imagine that this adult awakening was a universal response to the emergent condition of childhood. One reason is that only particular privileged groups or classes within society could afford the luxury of childhood with its demands on material provision, time and emotion and its attendant paraphernalia of toys and special clothing. For the rest, children remained realizable as a potential source of economic contribution to the family (Jenks, 1996). Thus, the most that can be legitimately inferred is that some places, at some times, in the second half of the 18th century, saw a change in some of the concepts and images of childhood.

Conflicting histories

Such is the nature of our evidence that to generalize from this conceptual shift to childhood experiences at large would involve making false assumptions about the uniformity of childhood. A distinction needs to be drawn between children's experiences and the ways in which the status of children is conceived of, because it is argued that they have different histories. Jordanova (1990) distinguishes between the fragmented history of *children* and the more unified account of attitudes to *childhood*. The former refers to 'a primary experience in the existential biography of each individual' (Jenks, 1996: 6), while the latter refers to the social status, childhood as a 'totalizing concept' or a 'formal category' embedded in programmes of care, routines of surveillance and schemes of education and assessment (Jenks, 1996: 5). There remains a gap between what legislators and reformers think are good for children and what children actually do (Cunningham, 1996).

Childhood as a non-natural, non-unified category

This dissonance which exists between children's own experiences of being children and the institutional form which childhood takes, suggests that childhood is not a natural, unified category, whose existence our evolving awareness has enabled us to identify correctly. Rather, there is a plurality of childhoods (Jordanova, 1990). A reason for this is that childhood is a temporary state, with no natural boundaries. Ariès (1962) states that, by the age of 10, girls in medieval times were already 'little women' and often mistress of the house; while today we read the shock-registering headlines: 'Is your 10-year-old sexually active?' (*Fair Lady*, 12 April 2000). This shows that it is not simply biological maturation that accounts for the distinction between child and adult (Schrag, 1977). For example, individuals with 'adult' morphologies may lack the capacity to function as adults, while a 6-year-old might have the 'adult' capacity of being financially self-supporting. Different cultures in different times have various transformatory processes such as valediction, rites of passage and initiation ceremonies, which are more socially constructed than 'development'-driven factors (Jenks, 1996). Thus, the 'adult'-'child' distinction is a social construction, delineated by boundaries that vary across geography, religion, politics, time, culture and society, and across class, race and gender so that uniform changes did not and could not occur (Jordanova, 1990). The result is a range of histories of childhood which demonstrate the erratic or non-linear evolution of the image of childhood (Jenks, 1996).

Adults' interpretations

This conflictual coexistence of children's experiences and the ways in which the status of children is conceived of constitutes a final reason why artworks

cannot be used to make inferences about the nature of childhood. Although they are ‘linked in elaborate, yet hitherto uncharted ways’ (Jordanova, 1990: 79), what adults say about childhood and how children experience childhood are not necessarily the same, for the following reasons. First, it is *adults* who ‘give children a voice’ – whether in paintings, literature or other epistolary media. Ubiquitous in physical, mental, legal, economic, sexual, domestic, philanthropic and moral spheres, the testimony of children in history is inextricably intertwined with the world of adults. Arguably, even the 20th-century institution of child art, driven to a large extent by psychologists such as Koppitz (1968), is constituted predominantly by adults’ interpretations and views, though it may well permit children, especially pre-literate ones, relatively more of a direct ‘voice’ in the production of sociological data than in previous centuries. Another reason that children cannot be demarcated from adults is that children are socialized by adults, learning their language, mental habits and patterns of behaviour (Jordanova, 1990). Finally, ‘childhood’ may coalesce in our minds as a natural, unified category because we are all somehow implicated in childhood: we were all once children, many have children, and our relation with children is continuously mediated through forms as divergent as: ‘tabloid accounts of Satanic abuse; the battles over the National Curriculum; the investment in and appeal of Disneyland; and the public reaction to the murder [by two 10-year-olds] of [3-year-old] Jamie Bulger, to name but a few’ (Jenks, 1996: 11). These factors lead to an ambivalence about childhood and children that sometimes amounts to contradiction. For example, at the same time that the Philanthropic Society was established (in 1788), child labour and other abuses were on the increase (Crown, 1984).

Conclusion

Very little about the nature of childhood through history – that is, children’s psychic and social realities and society’s attitude towards childhood – can be inferred based on visual images alone. The category error that consists in mistaking artworks for social reality means that at best only risky inferences can be made. The overarching reason was ontological: because the nature of art is such that it is subject to influences independent of its subject matter, even the most basic interpretation of a painting’s meaning can be open to doubt. Even without the danger of category mistakes, social historians who seek to use art as evidence for the nature of childhood can fall prey to numerous methodological errors such as basing analyses on inadequate evidence and drawing wrong inferences from the evidence. The inevitability of committing one or more of these historiographical errors need not paralyse us, but it does suggest that any inferences made about the nature of childhood through history must necessarily be tentative and hypothetical. They should also be based on a wide range of different types of evidence. With

different types of evidence, artworks can conceivably be of some use for illuminating past practices and material artefacts. For inferring motivations and attitudes however they cannot be anything other than risky.

From a social constructionist perspective, it was argued that childhood is not a natural uniform category whose existence our evolving awareness has enabled us to identify correctly. Both at the individual level (the experience of children) and the level of institutions (attitudes towards childhood), the history of childhood is one of discontinuity rather than continuity. Given this plurality of worlds which children are argued to inhabit, it is more correct to speak of the *histories* of childhood. So desperate at times for paintings to prove their point, even eminent historians use evidence selectively and riskily. They tend to neglect the possibility that childhood as well as artworks and historiographical argumentation are socially constructed. This article has indicated very briefly the confluence of three social constructs: childhood, artworks and historiographical argumentation. The controversies surrounding the 'social construction' of each of these topics warrants separate, in-depth study.

Acknowledgement

The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly and *The Painter's Daughters With a Cat* are reproduced here with kind permission from the National Gallery, London.

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