

# *For A Sentiment of Beat Infancy: Conceptions of Childhood in the American Avant-garde*

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An interpretation of the representation of the figure of the Child, as it has been treated by different theorists and historians through out time, in the work of the filmmakers from the Beat Generation.

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In his 1969 survey of America's Underground Film, Parker Tyler deftly identifies a spiritual contiguity binding the material practice and aesthetic qualities of the form to the universal youth movement of the 1960s, and its travail towards the democratic emancipation of expression for all. From the Cabaret Voltaire to the New Wave cinemas of Europe and the Americas, from the birth of punk rock to the pluralist art gangs of the 1990s, any history of the Avantgarde in the West is also a history of young men and women dissatisfied with the material conditions of their upbringing. Unsettling, however, is Tyler's postulation of this connection, its relevance and import, for its introduction is immediately followed by certain value-based extrapolations discursively bound by a particular rubric of infantilism. For Tyler, the "indeterminately young" (p. 25) is "inexperienced and unproven ... [it] is a great big toddler, the Underground Film" (p. 30). A considerably pejorative connotation accrues to the figure of the child in its repeated usage throughout his study. This betrays a certain prejudgment of the works in question, a latent desire to trivialize certain films and their makers, and most disconcertingly, some inclination to short-circuit the energy which courses through both.

Tyler's conception of the child and childhood (deployed

with an aim to aspersion) is not without precedent. Thankfully, it is not the only way one might think of such subjects. As an object of social and cultural construction, variously co-determined by a number of variables, childhood is not without a history in which it has served, and for which it will continue to serve a myriad of functions. As a source of inspiration and as an object of thematic significance in certain works of the Avant-garde cinema addressed in Tyler's study, the representations of the child and of childhood are approached in numerous ways. While Tyler offers praise for certain works, negative judgments of others tend to be couched in the derisive language of a particular conception of childhood which is incompatible with childhood as it figures variously in the minds of other filmmakers. As there are many ways that one can approach such constructs, it is possible that analyses which presuppose other conceptions of children and childhood might better serve the aims of criticism.

First, we should note, for the most part, children and childhood were egregiously overlooked as objects of critical and historical study until 1962 when Phillip Ariès's hugely influential survey, *Centuries of Childhood*, inaugurated a wave of work by historians (who, for the most part, dedicated themselves to disparaging Ariès for his slack methods and immoderate conclusions) and social scientists (who were perhaps too willing to overlook such weaknesses). Quite provocatively, Ariès wrote, "in Medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (p. 124). The writer argues that such societies lacked a sentiment de l'enfance, "[any] awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult,

even the young adult” (p. 124). He maintains that such a sentiment did not begin to develop through the 15th and 17th centuries. Ariès has been critiqued for this conclusion on the grounds that the mere absence of a conception of childhood resembling that of his era does not constitute a total lack (Ashplant & Wilson, 1988). It is possible, as Doris Desclais Berkvam (1983) has noted, that Medieval societies possessed “a consciousness of childhood so unlike our own that we do not recognize it” (p. 165).

Evidence seems to suggest that Medieval societies did possess some *sentiment de l'enfance*, if perhaps an unpleasant and unsympathetic conception, though many theorists remain reluctant to pin it down. Historian James A. Shultz (1985) has suggested that from antiquity until the 18th century, children in the West were thought of as imperfect, deficient, or incomplete adults (pp. 244-51). Childhood was a period of transition, the time of a subject's becoming complete, or fully human. Of course, opinion as to the character of the incomplete human could vary wildly. In *A History of Childhood*, Colin Heywood (2001) suggests such opinions fell somewhere between 17th century French cleric Pierre de Bérulle's observation that childhood “is the most vile and abject state of human nature, after that of death,” and the sentimental belief later posited in the Victorian Era that purity and innocence characterized childhood (p. 9). Whether understood as a period during which sin is largely relinquished in the interest of becoming perfect, or during which sin accrued, corrupting the child in the interest of its adaptability to the community of adults, childhood was nevertheless something one sped through in order to join the work and play of what Ariès has labeled the “great community of men” (pp. 125-30).

For the Romantics, however, the child was something of a mystical figure, a creature blessed by God. Childhood was less a period of becoming-adult, but, as Heywood suggests, “a source of inspiration that would last a lifetime” (p. 2). John Locke's 1693 treatise, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1762 work, *Emile, or On Education*, certainly encouraged such sympathy for children. For the Romantics, such sympathy would blossom into something more. Children were, as David Grylls (1978) has observed in *Guardians and Angels*, “creatures of deeper wisdom, finer aesthetic sensitivity, and a more profound awareness of enduring moral truths” (p. 35). “The Youth, who daily farther from the east/ Must travel, still is Nature's Priest, And by the vision splendid/ Is on his way attended,” wrote Wordsworth in 1807 in his “Ode: Intimations of

Immortality from Recollections of Childhood”, and here one finds something of the Romantic belief in the visionary abilities of the child, its interconnection with the child's purity (1998:701 lines 72-5).

Nevertheless, this unabashed belief in the child's purity and innocence would wane with the popularization of Freudian theories of human personality and sexuality, and with the demands of the Industrial Revolution. In the Modern Era, the child would become a source of anxiety and a figure of ambiguity. Heywood notes that against an increasing awareness of the realities of childhood sexuality and acute economic demands, American reformers and Puritans deployed something like a “new and politicized version of the Romantic child” (p. 28). One might conclude that this period was characterized by the desire to protect what Viviana A. Zelizer (1985) has labeled the economically “worthless” but emotionally “priceless” child (pp. 3-6) from the rapidly changing physical and moral conditions of advanced society, and the often contradictory need to prepare children for life in this very milieu. Thus, we see in the Modern Era a commingling of multiple discourses of children and childhood, and it is perhaps for this variety that one finds amongst works of American Avant-garde cinema a variety of means and intentions explicit and implicit in the treatment of such themes. As Marjorie Keller (1986) notes in her analysis of childhood in the films of such artists as Joseph Cornell and Stan Brakhage, “childhood is a particularly central theme in a tradition where artists have used the film medium to reflect on their own uniqueness” (p. 14).

It was Cornell who most wholeheartedly dedicated his artistic practice to the subject matter of children and childhood, and it is Cornell who most wholeheartedly duplicates the Romantic conception of childhood in his work. In his boxes and cinema, Keller identifies a “Romantic and Victorian representation of women and children as motif; structures created in the spirit of play and pre-rational thought; and content that is veiled in the asexual innocence of the mythology of childhood” (p. 101). In the first and third characteristics of Cornell's thematic insistence on childhood, the influence of French and German Romantic poetry and prose is apparent. Impetus for the iconographic privilege of the female child in Cornell's work can easily be traced back to Dickens and Carroll, but the function of androgyny in Cornell's work can be traced back further, to Goethe's Mignon. In the second characteristic, however, one finds something of a break with the Romantics (if ultimately in the interest of further developing the figure of the

Romantic child): the child uncorrupted by civilization is both Cornell's privileged object of representation and his ideal audience.

In the manner by which narrative flow and realistic space are broken down in such films as *Centuries Of June* (1955), *The Aviary* (1955), and the *Children's Party Trilogy* (1968), Keller identifies the influence of Jean Piaget (1923) whose *Language and Thought of the Child* was among the works collected in Cornell's personal library at his family home. For Piaget, the communicating child knows the logical order of coherent communication, but it does not consider it important, and it will first relay and decipher information according to his or her individual logic. Thus, Keller suggests, "as an artist, Cornell gave new contexts to images that were once part of a rational or otherwise representational system" (p. 110). Moreover, Keller writes, "as a filmmaker, the order of events was altered as well as the context, and it is to the films that one can most apply Piaget's understanding of mental sequence in children" (p. 110). The child is here exalted as a figure of visionary capability, and one might conclude that the androgynous child in Cornell's work may be understood as one who has not yet learned, or refuses to learn (and perhaps become corrupted by), the purported binarity of sex.

In Brakhage's cinema, the child and childhood alternately enjoy and suffer a more varied representation than in Cornell's work. As Keller observes, the child functions something like a barometer in Brakhage's development as a filmmaker (p. 16). "At almost every juncture in his prolific career," writes Keller, "[Brakhage] calls upon childhood to represent an aspect of film theory, perception, artistic creation, universal history, or autobiography. Childhood represents the Romantic Self and the Other" (p. 179). Keller is quick to note that mere Romantic idealization would not long remain an option for Brakhage as it was for Cornell, who nevertheless remained an influence: Brakhage fathered children of his own. Thus, Keller suggests that one can easily distinguish between the glowingly Romantic representation children enjoy in Brakhage's early films, which coincided with the birth of his children, and the increasing disavowal of this idealism as the filmmaker encountered more and more difficulty subsuming his children into his artistic practice (p. 180). One cannot deny a shift in perspective between Brakhage's early and later work. In *Metaphors on Vision*, the artist wondered "How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green?'" (1963:12). Later, in *The Weir-Falcon Saga* (1970), his growing disillusionment leads to a virtual rejection of his son. And finally,

*Murder Psalm* (1980) is characterized by Brakhage's attempts to "deeply perceive" his children, to wrest them "from the dominant culture," but his efforts lead only to "his continuing alienation" (Keller:180). This shift is perhaps best understood as Brakhage's abandonment of a Romantic conception of childhood for a new conception of childhood distinctly modern in character, and its correlative modes of representation.

With the cinema of Beat filmmakers such as Robert Frank, Ron Rice, Ken Jacobs, and Jack Smith, one finds not only cinema about children and childhood, but a collective attempt to embrace childhood itself, to become children again, against the alienating implications of Modern adulthood. In Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* (1959), for instance, Beat poets horse around at an intimate party and later jam out a jazz tune with their host's son. In Ron Rice's *The Flower Thief* (1960), one finds poet, actor, and filmmaker, Taylor Mead, as a child-like hero ambling about in an adult's world, finding comfort in youthful play with a child's teddy-bear. In Robert Nelson's *The Great Blondino* (1967), the eponymous hero is dwarfed by a gigantic chair and a rhinoceros pacing in the distance. In such films, children function not as the idealistic figures of Romantic literature and art as in the boxes and films of Cornell, nor as the problematic Modern figures increasingly objectified in Stan Brakhage's broad body of work, but as peculiar combinations of the traits of each. One finds children exalted above all others for their moral, spiritual, and aesthetic sensibilities, but no longer as idealistic abstractions: these are children actively shaping and shaped by an undeniably material reality.

This is perhaps the particularity of the Beat conception and mobilization of childhood for which Mary Batten (1962) is reaching for in her *Film Comment* analysis of Taylor Mead's performance in *The Flower Thief*. "The child-like hero tries desperately to become involved," writes Batten:

**[H]is pathos and his madness are such that he must search for involvement by playing with toys. He scrubs his teddy bear and sets it on a latrine in an attempt to project real functions onto something—a palpable object; and playing with toys seems to be the only method of recognizing reality that is acceptable to society. This, the film seems to be saying, is the irony of play, i.e., play for children is total involvement—a direct socialization of feeling. Yet play for adults is**

**the least terrifying way of objectifying reality.  
(p. 31)**

What if not an invested objectification of reality is afoot in the Beats' liberal indulgence in pot in *Pull My Daisy*, and Blondino the tight-rope walker's conscious playing at the limits of life and death in Nelson's film? What we learn from Piaget is that in the total involvement of play it is the child who makes its world his or her object precisely because the child has no regard for a unilaterally defined reality as such.

The irony of play in *The Flower Thief* and other works of Beat cinema then is far more complicated and it is best understood with regard to the theory of subjection Michel Foucault (1977) develops in *Discipline and Punish*. First, the becoming-adult (of Mead's performance) who objectifies the world in play becomes object himself. This is because the becoming-adult (on his or her way to adulthood) allows his or her material world to function as reality, an authoritative source of enjoined expectations, symbolic injunctions, ideological interpolation, and so on, which limit the playful actions available to the becoming-adult, and delimit his subjective possibility in direct accordance with his reality. But subjection in Foucault's work, as Judith Butler (1997) has observed in *The Psychic Life of Power*, "is a kind of power that not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of domination, but also activates or forms the subject" (p. 84). There exists always the possibility of counter-movement, for the process of becoming-adult is also, potentially, the occasion of becoming-child. And thus, the irony of play is doubled in the figure of the becoming-child (Mead himself acting in *The Flower Thief*), and tripled in the figure of the becomingchild- becoming-adult (of Mead's performance reconsidered). Mead's characters may be "eternal children, divine fools, pure-hearted simpletons detached from the world and innocent of its machinations," as Ray Carney (1995) suggests in "Escape Velocity: Notes on Beat Film" (p. 202), but Mead's work, the play of other Beat actors, and the Beat conception of childhood, which is the basis for it all, are not so innocent.

A similarly complex conception of childhood is present at the level of Beat cinema's aesthetic qualities and material production. Here, however, it is the formal conventions and narrative logic of classical Hollywood cinema which are shirked in the interest of free expression and play. One need only consider Ron Rice's playfully sloppy manifesto, "Foundation For the Invention and Creation of Absurd Movies"

in the Spring 1962 issue of Jonas Mekas's *Film Culture*, for some indication as to how a willful ignorance, or innocence with regard to "proper" filmmaking, functioned as a privileged starting point for artistic expression. Rice writes:

**We decided to completely throw out content and concentrate only on form. After this was decided I called Hollywood and asked J.B. to send up to San Francisco a complete 'Direct it your self technician kit'. [sic]**

**The following Friday I received a CABLEGRAM, it read....SORRY: HOLLYWOOD UNABLE TO SEND KIT: SUGGEST YOU CONTACT THE NEAREST MENTAL HOSPITAL: J.B.. [sic] (p. 19)**

Against the Hollywood standard, the films of Ron Rice are particularly rough, with planning and detailed scripting abandoned in the interest of greater freedom and possible creativity. "[By] using a cheaper method of working, one can afford to discover new things that can be discovered," suggests Rice in a 1962 interview with Mary Batten for *Film Comment* (p. 32). The crude aesthetic of such cinema is both index of its production, and sign of its makers' unfettered visionary power, something like Brakhage's child who ventures out into a field of grass without having learned 'Green'. And so, to critique or to seek to analyze such cinema apropos of other cinematic modes of expression, or with reference to a worldview characteristically un-Beat, is to lose the object of criticism or analysis in translation.

Parker Tyler, for instance, is not without somewhat complimentary remarks for certain works of Beat cinema, but the language he uses serves ultimately to undermine a wholly commendatory reading. His observation that "neither the child nor the madman can be overlooked as valid dimensions of Underground aesthetics" suggests an awareness of the films' subject matter and its significance, but he resorts to a value-based appraisal incompatible with the Beat sensibility when he observes, "only in a very few films does childlike or lunatic imagination achieve real poetic articulation, and then perhaps but fragmentarily" (p. 200). Whatever praise Tyler offers is re-figured with an aim to trivialize when he concludes his survey with an admonishment directed towards "young artists and students who like imagining they are as good as or better at sixteen or seventeen than those who are classifiable as adults" (p. 238). The critic thus maintains a distinctly Medieval

conception of childhood, with children no more than incomplete adults and certainly *less-than* fully human, but the Beat cinema demands precisely that childhood not be regarded as the period of the subject's completion, his or her realization in the figure of the status quo adult. Beat cinema proffers no coherent or uncomplicated representation of the process of becoming-adult. And while a Medieval conception of children and childhood is particularly unsuited to understanding Beat cinema, Romantic and Modern conceptions of children and childhood also fail to illuminate the complexity and political significance of the Beat investment in the figure of the child. There is, however, a remarkable affinity between the Beat conception of childhood and Giorgio Agambem's scattered musings on the concept of infancy.

In "For a Philosophy of Infancy", Agambem (2001) notes how the axolotl salamander—a discrete species that retains characteristics of the larva throughout its lifetime, but which will metamorphose into an adult specimen of the speckled salamander upon an injection of a particular thyroid hormone despite its ability to reproduce itself in its larval state—has shed new light on human ancestry and evolutionary biology. Humans, after all, share a number of morphological characteristics with the anthropoid fetus not found among adult apes, and human evolution could be said to resemble the trajectory of the axolotl. Beginning with the hypothesis that human beings evolved from baby primates as something like "eternal children", resistant to their genetic encoding, Agambem advances a significant reinterpretation of the uniquely human traditions of language and culture.

Agambem ventures that unlike the axolotl, which simply settled into its larval environment, the neotenic human "so adheres to its lack of specialization and totipotency that it refuses any destiny and specific environment as to solely follow its own indeterminacy and immaturity" (p. 121). "[W]ith its voice free of every genetic directive," writes the author, "with absolutely nothing to say and express, the child could, unlike any other animal, name things in its language and, in this way open-up before itself an infinity of possible worlds" (p. 121). Agambem suggests the infant is its own potentiality, living its endless possibility; and, in play, the infant no longer distinguishes between possibility and reality, choosing instead "immanence without place and subject, an adhering that adheres neither to an identity nor to some thing, but solely to its own possibility and potentiality. It is an absolute *immanence* that is immanent to nothing" (p. 121). But what is key in this celebration

of infancy is Agambem's observation that such a form-of-life is not fantasy, as the reactionary adult might proclaim, but rather, an adherence to physiological life so close that the infant becomes "indiscernible from it" (p. 121). Thus viewed, adulthood and intellectual maturity as Tyler might regard it represents something of a regression, an introjection of linguistic and cultural injunction at the expense of one's potential to endlessly play in and reshape each sphere ad infinitum.

Viewed through such a conception of childhood, the Beats emerge as something like totipotent infants. In their play with language and movement, one finds they adhere only to the possibilities of the neotenic body and mind explicitly against pre-given directives, whether literary, cinematic, or those of the broad sphere of human culture in general. As Tyler opines, "only by annihilating history—that is, only by declining to measure time in terms of values—can Underground Film get its kinky, headstrong way and assert the nonhistorical values of existence over the historic existence of values" (p. 238), but this is to posit the transcendence of value, ignorant of ruptures and fissures in human history, not to mention the myopic reduction of history to its facts. History, for Agambem, is "that which is absolutely immanent," and so, he concludes, "the child is the only integrally historical being, [...] the cipher of a higher history" (p. 122). What is needed now, and what is perhaps to be found in works of Beat cinema, is a sentiment of this neotenic and totipotent figure.

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