

Defending the last taboo

A contribution to the *Art Censorship: the bigger picture* forum

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When I looked at the twenty or so Bill Henson photos on the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery website just hours before they were taken down I could see immediately that they were not pornographic. They struck me as artistic in intent and execution. The studies of the 13-year old girl were confounding and discomfoting but she was not presented in a sexual context or as an object of normal sexual desire.

It seemed to me that the police intervention was a mistake and that, if a wrong had been done, a civil remedy would be fitting. However, deciding that the Henson photos are art rather than pornography does not end the ethical debate. There is a third, more nuanced position.

Sex and children are a highly combustible mix, one rendered even more volatile by the relentless sexualisation of children by advertisers and the media over the last decade. The Henson exhibition cannot be isolated from an emergent social milieu in which children's maturation is increasingly drenched with erotic imagery and controlled by a commercial culture that exploits children by imposing on them adult forms of sexual desire and behaviour.

Yet Henson and his defenders have reacted to the criticism as if the artistic merit of the works somehow quarantines them from these tensions. It's possible that in creating the images the artist was not fully conscious of the changed context of childhood. After all, major retailers produce with impunity advertisements featuring 10-year olds with sultry expressions, the public is blasé about pre-teens watching video clips showing simulated intercourse, and we allow magazines for pre-pubescent girls to advise them that anal sex is a "personal choice". I suspect that the extraordinary anxiety over paedophilia in recent years represents, at least in part, an over-compensation by society for its complicity in sanctioning the sexualisation of childhood.

For decades in post-war Israel performances of works by Richard Wagner were banned. The associations between Nazi Germany and Wagner's music were too strong in the minds of most Israelis. The argument was not about the quality of Wagner's music but the political

meaning of it. In an environment marked by widespread unease over the sexualisation of children and revulsion at paedophilia, Henson's work, whatever its artistic merit, was an exercise in bad taste, particularly when the images were uploaded to the internet.

Any artistic innocence in the Henson exhibition was forfeited by the decision of the gallery, presumably with the artist's assent, to select one of the most explicit images to advertise the exhibition, a decision that can only be seen as a publicity stunt. Well, it worked. It's typical of the confusion in this debate that Henson's most vociferous champion, former gallery director Patrick McCaughey, claims that the artist has "suffered a gross disservice by having one image" extracted from the exhibition and used as proof that it offended public morals.

Yet Roslyn Oxley and Bill Henson went much further than putting that image on the invitation to the opening. By placing the photographs of the girl on the internet they committed the images to eternity and relinquished all control over how they are consumed.

Culture-keepers such as McCaughey defend Henson for pushing the boundaries, challenging our sensibilities, and "rebell[ing] against bourgeois order" (a bourgeois order presumably represented at this forum by Hetty Johnson!), yet they are indignant when Henson's provocation elicits a reaction from viewers. (McCaughey, by the by, ridiculed those who objected to a picture in a US exhibition showing a black man in a suit with his penis hanging out by likening it to a painting of the naked baby Jesus, suggesting to me a certain lack of discernment on McCaughey's part.)

The truth is that artistic provocateurs expect us to keep our discomfort private, an unwritten rule that for years has caused some gallery-goers to suppress their feelings about the 'creepiness' of some of Henson's images. Yet when the disquiet is expressed in public it is derided as moral atavism or bourgeois sensibility.

It's the same put-down used by the porn industry's academic apologists who argue that efforts to restrict porn are always "the puritanical repression of healthy sexuality". For them, healthy sexuality now encompasses staples of porn videos like multiple penetration, hair pulling and facial ejaculation. Those who object to modern porn's brutalisation of sexual intimacy, including many authentic feminists, do no more than attempt to rescue the true meaning of liberation.

I have said that the Henson images are not pornography; but they are only one artistic decision away from it. Call to mind the pictures showing the girl's full body, and imagine

them with one or two minor changes. If she had been looking into the camera or had her head tilted at a coquettish angle or if the camera had been positioned a little differently so as to expose more of her vulva, then the images would have taken on a very different meaning. Instead of pushing the boundary, they would have crossed it.

I make this point to confront the claims to artistic freedom advanced by several prominent Henson defenders. No-one in this hall believes this right is unlimited, yet every time someone raises a moral objection to an artistic work they meet condescension and derision, as if moral sensibility is always rooted in aesthetic ignorance. If a couple of barely perceptible changes to the works in question would have rendered them pornographic, why are defenders of artistic licence so incensed that questions should be asked?

While much of the talk-back chatter over the Henson affair was ugly and ill-informed, the moral panic from the great unwashed has been matched and exceeded by the censorship panic from the aesthetes. So incontinent has been their language I'm sure that if ever there were a real attempt to suppress artistic freedom in this country they'd be struck dumb.

For instance, under the headline "The country's cultural agenda is being hijacked by witch-hunters, vigilantes and reactionary politicians", art critic John McDonald characterises the Henson outcry as an international humiliation, "an enormous embarrassment" the ramifications of which "hardly bear thinking about". McDonald evokes the image of Orwell's Thought Police and compares those who question Henson to the Taliban. He then accuses Hetty Johnson of hysteria.

There is no censorship worth noting in Australia. Is anyone seriously arguing we live in an era of sexual repression? As if our culture were not awash with erotic imagery and sex talk. As if our society did not allow a vast smorgasbord of sexual practices catering to almost every taste. Does anyone believe we should be *more* preoccupied with sex than we are now?

And yet when any limit is suggested, such as measures to shield children from this confusing and at times disturbing world of sexual pleasure, an outcry goes up from the libertarians whose fears were formed in the sixties.

After the sexual revolution, gay liberation and the women's movement virtually every taboo has been swept away. For most Australians there remain only three: incest, bestiality and paedophilia. The first two are now being eroded, and I suspect the internet has spawned a huge increase in desire for the third. For those who want to push the sexual limits, these are

the only ones left. I for one, with all of my history of progressive advocacy, am willing to stand up and say: “Thus far, and no more.” Perversion is not subversion.

The truth is that the avant-garde who imagine themselves defying the rules of a repressive society are trapped in the past, wrestling with the phantoms of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Portnoy’s Complaint*.

The sexual revolution—with all of its celebration of diversity and invitation to transgress — is over, and we won. In fact, the boundaries have been pushed back so far that the world of adults and then of teenagers became overloaded with sexual freedoms and erotic imagery, to the point where the marketing culture had to seek fresh pastures, finding them in children’s untapped sexual possibilities.

This is the new world we live in. The libertarian outpourings in support of Henson and artistic freedom are curiously obsolete. The power has shifted. Hegemony no longer lies with a reactionary conservative culture; it lies with the corporations and the culture makers in the media. Pushing the boundaries is now a marketing technique. The advertising industry must keep alive the moralising ghosts to convince their target market that they still have something to rebel against.

In this they receive sterling support from those pre-occupied with censorship, who ring the tocsin when ever a film director, artist or publisher decides to transgress the last tattered vestiges of public decency.

Transgression is passé. Subverting the dominant paradigm is old hat. The enemies of culture are not to be found in the brick veneers of the suburbs but in the creative department of Saatchi & Saatchi. Today the historic mission is no longer to tear down, but to rebuild. The task is for us to understand that freedom cannot be found in a moral free-for-all, but only in the careful exercise of restraint.

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