

Virginal Innocence and Corporeal Sensuality

Reading meanings of childhood in contemporary fashion advertising

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Abstract

Recently, the body of critical childhood studies has emphasized children's active participation and competence in consumerism. Nevertheless, children's participation has also aroused concerns about the loss of childhood and childhood innocence. Children are seen particularly vulnerable when it comes to children's representations, especially fashion and fashion advertising. They are seen as one of the legitimate places where children's sexualization is possible. This article analyzes samples from children's contemporary high fashion advertising and shows, through the method of close-reading, the "visual grammar" of innocence and sexuality. Although childhood is coded with innocence, children's fashion advertising plays with ambiguity that centers on sexuality.

Children have become a central part of the consumerist economics in contemporary metropolitan centers of the globalized societies. Popular imagery, fashion advertising included, represents children as capable consumers, who can choose competently from the flood of brands (Cook 2004, Schor 2004, Quart 2003). Fashion magazines cover stories about child trendsetters. *Elle*-magazine (2011: 48) covered a story about American celebrity children or "mini-fashionistas". The reader is told that Suri Cruise (age 4), Willow Smith (age 10) and Lourdes Ciccione (age 14) know how to dress. Another child, Cecilia Cassini (age 11) has her own fashion label. It is told that she became a fashion designer already at the

age of six. While writing this article, the Danish media house Carl Allers Etablissement As reported that it starts publishing the Finnish version of the Danish fashion magazine *Top Model*, aimed at girls between 6–12 years old (website address in the reference list). The managing director of the magazine told that the market for little girls is “interesting, because it has not yet been totally conquered unlike for example the market for middle-aged women”. Objections immediately rose. It was claimed that little children, and especially little girls, do not need these kinds of magazines, which teach them to police their appearances. It was claimed that the magazine teaches little girls to loose weight and is the cause for young women’s low self-esteem, loneliness and eating disorders (Saarikoski 2011).

A couple of things arise from these examples: first, children have indeed become important players in global and local capitalism and childhood has become an essential point in the social formation of global consumers (Langer 2004: 251–277). Secondly: children’s active participation in consumerism arises mixed feelings and worries about the loss of childhood and childhood innocence. The paradox is that even though progressive adults and a body of critical studies on childhood (e.g. James & Prout 1990, Jenks 1996, James, Jenks and Prout 1998) see children as competent actors who make meanings and participate actively in the social world like anyone else, they also see children particularly vulnerable when it comes to children’s representations in advertising. Or, as Henri Giroux (2000: 60) has summarized: “Sexualizing children may be the final frontier in the fashion world.” In other words, while children’s agency is advocated, it is done only on a very limited scale. When it comes to areas touching upon sexuality, even the most progressive adults raise their voice and demand that adults must let children be children i.e. innocent as long as possible.

In his classical work *Gender and advertising*, Erwin Goffman (1979: ix) points out:

Although the pictures shown here cannot be taken as representative of gender behavior in real life ... one can probably make a significant negative statement about them, namely, as *pictures* they are not perceived as peculiar or unnatural.

Goffman’s argument about the normalcy of sexualized representations in advertising does not apply to children. On the contrary, representations of children as sexual are commonly seen as peculiar, unnatural, harmful,

dangerous and “pedophile-friendly” (Vänskä 2011 forthcoming). However, there is more to this story, especially when dealing with visual representations of sartorial and bodily gestures. In this article, I am interested in unpacking the ideology of innocence. I will analyze samples from children’s contemporary high fashion advertising and unpack meanings of innocence, which is still the hegemonic discourse of childhood. The research method is close-reading (Vänskä 2006: 15–16), with which I will show the “visual grammar” (Kress 2003, Kree & Leeuwen 2009) of innocence and what it means in contemporary fashion advertising. I will show what kind of elements construct innocence: clothing, colors, child model’s posing, gaze, and details of the body.

Innocence is a challenging topic for visual studies, since it bears such an intimate relationship to visibility and clothing. The reading will explain what innocence means, what kind of information it yields up and what kind of meanings it connotes. Finally, I will explain what kind of relationship it has with other images and to discourses on childhood. My reading will show that contemporary fashion advertising brings together two, seemingly opposing narratives: the story of the innocent child and the story of the sexual child. It is this simultaneousness of these opposing narratives, which makes images of children both alluring and problematic. It is also a quality, which defines children’s fashion advertising at large. It seems that even though childhood is heavily coded with the ideology of innocence, children’s fashion advertising plays, like adult fashion advertising, with ambiguity that centers on innocence and sexuality. It also seems that both of these qualities are commodified and fetishized autonomous signs. Advertisements are representatives of symbolic childhood. They are configurations, which give shape to our contemporary understanding of concrete children (Cook 2002: 2–5). The relationship between childhood and innocence is naturalized and fetishized in symbolic representations such as fashion advertising (Kincaid 1998). Nevertheless, childhood innocence occupies a taken-for-granted quality in representations whereas there is an unproblematized concern that children’s sexuality is catalyzed and damaged by fashion advertising. It is also presumed that representation of sexuality in children confirms that sexualization has already occurred – whereas no-one seems to be really interested in that innocence,

which implies a position of a-sexuality as a concept, is in fact already sexual in contemporary fashion advertising.¹

Problematic innocence

What is innocence exactly? How is it visualized in contemporary fashion advertisements? Let's look at two advertisements, taken from the children's high fashion magazine *Vogue Bambini* from 2008.



Image 1

¹ While writing this article, two of my colleagues sent me an advertisement reminding of the late-70s style. In the advertisement, which sells perfume produced by Love Cosmetics, we see a Lolita-like little girl holding a white teddy bear in her arms. Her childhood innocence is juxtaposed with adult sexuality in many ways: she is wearing make-up and looks directly at the viewer with her pouting lips ajar. The caption of the advertisement gives it away: "Love's Baby Soft. Because innocence is sexier than you think." The text beside the image explains further: "Love's Baby Soft is that irresistible, clean-baby smell, grown-up enough to be sexy. It's soft-smelling. Pure and innocent. It may well be the sexiest fragrance around." The advertisement is to be found in the Internet presenting "Top 48 ads that would never be allowed today" ([Http://owni.eu/2010/11/08/top-48-ads-that-would-never-be-allowed-today/](http://owni.eu/2010/11/08/top-48-ads-that-would-never-be-allowed-today/)).

In one image, we see a boy, in another a girl, dressed according to their gender (Images 1–2). The boy wears a black-and-white striped polo t-shirt, a pair of black breeches and white sneakers. The girl in the other image is dressed in a school-girl outfit: in white knee-high socks with pink stripes and a letter D, a pink skirt and a light-beige jacket with green stripes and sneakers. Neither of the children seems to be aware of the presence of the camera. They are photographed as if they were completely unaware of the presence of the camera: both are engrossed in jumping on a Louis IX-style pearl grey sofa in a white room with stucco-decorations on the wall.



Image 2

Images 1 and 2:
Icons of innocence. Fashion advertising circulates the idea of innocent child successfully

Both advertisements fall under the stereotypical way of portraying children as innocent creatures immersed in their childhoodness. The playing child, who is separated from the adult through clothing, is familiar from the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau described by such historians as Philippe Ariès (1962). Ariès explains that the idea of childhood did not exist before

the 17th century.² Children were dressed and painted as miniature adults, while adults played with toys and read fairy-tales. He also notes that even though infancy was recognized as a stage of helplessness in the Middle Ages, childhood as a separate stage of being emerged only during the 17th century. This development arose from parents' growing attention to children's wellbeing and from a new kind of interest in children's play and education. Ultimately, the modern discovery of childhood connects to a preoccupation with future, to educating proper citizens. Here Ariès refers especially to Rousseau's (1762/1989) ideas. He advocated children's education, care, play, and exercise. One aspect of education into a future proper citizen concerned children's clothing, which he considered an important part of ensuring children's natural virtuousness even in an imperfect society. Rousseau (1762/1989: 100) advises:

The limbs of a growing child should be free to move easily in his clothing; nothing should cramp their growth or movement; there should be nothing tight, nothing fitting closely to the body, no belts of any kind. The French style of dress, uncomfortable and unhealthy for a man, is especially bad for children. [...] The best plan is to keep children in frocks as long as possible and then to provide them with loose clothing, without trying to define the shape which is only another way of deforming [the child]. Their defects of body and mind may all be traced to the same source, the desire to make men of them before their time.

The Dior advertisements draw from this historical and yet naturalized idea of childhood innocence. Fashion historian Alison Lurie (1983: 39) has explained that Rousseau's ideas became visible in children's clothing at the latter part of the 18th century. Little girls were stripped off from their girdles and dressed in simple and comfortable frocks whereas boys were freed from their long coats, tight waistcoats, high-collared shirts and knee breeches and dressed in loosely fitting skeleton suits – much in the same way as the child models are dressed in these Dior advertisements. Flat slippers followed and simple haircuts replaced wigs and powder, which still continued to be fashionable among adults of that time (Lurie 1983:

² Many theorists after Ariès have found his ideas challenging and hard to accept. Ariès has also been accused of anachronism (deMause 1976, Vann 1982, Pollock 1983). He does not pay attention to the category of "youth" either.

101). Since the 18th century, clothing has played an important role in communicating childhood as separate from adulthood.

But not only clothing: children's visual representation changed also. Rousseau's philosophical ideas transformed into visual language and children received their own visual morphology. Childlike representations started to appear. Art historian Anne Higonnet (1998) records many English and other European painters, who altered the previous way of visualizing children as miniature adults, that is, as beings, whose bodies told the viewer the child's future social status as a member of aristocracy or royalty (see also Gallati 2004, Sidén 2001.). The new look on childhood, which was in tune with philosophical and social trends of that time, did not circle around the child's status. Instead, focus was on children's play and especially the child's innocent body, which was represented as the opposite of the adult body. Painters such as Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Thomas Lawrence and Sir Joshua Reynolds changed dramatically the way in which children were portrayed. For example, Reynold's painting *The Age of Innocence* (1797) became "the foundation of what we assume childhood looks like" (Higonnet & Albinson 1997: 125). The newness of these paintings was that they did not tell, unlike their predecessors, much about the future adult social status or adult life in general. Instead, the innocent child was stripped of all social meanings and became an object of gaze, and object to be looked-at; an object with neither history nor future, let alone own thoughts or desires. The innocent child, immersed in its childhoodness, was supposed to perform genderlessness and classlessness of the child. Nevertheless, these representations were firmly rooted in the new emerging middle-class discourse, which was characterized by cleanliness, naturalness and lack of any desires or thoughts (Higonnet & Albinson 1997: 129–130).

The Dior advertisements draw from this history of Romantic childhood innocence, which has served as the dominant model for proper childhood for over two hundred years. The advertisement also points to the history described by Viviana Zelizer in her classic book *Pricing the priceless child* (1985). Zelizer shows that the Romantic notion of the child at the turn of the 19th century emerged at the same time when the first laws regulating child labor were promulgated. When the child became "economically useless" it also came to be "emotionally priceless". As a cultural figure, the child "came to be understood as primarily engaged in emotional work: requiring and expressing the family's [...] capacity for love and joy" (Sanchez-Eppler 2005: xviii) – pretty much in the same way as the child

models in the Dior advertisements exemplify. Even if the “child’s play” may seem completely natural, the conceptual and visual history of childhood proves it to be a historical fabrication, framed as an idealized creature, described as deserving play and freedom. Also, advertisements are always constructed, designed and staged performances. Ironically, the Dior advertisements make use and profit from that very figure, which was deliberately emptied from all economical value and utilitarianism. Advertising shows that the innocent child is a very profitable figure for marketers and clothing companies. In fact, the affective value, which was designed as the core of the innocent child, has been turned into an affective tool in the market place. The innocent, pretty and adorable child always turns the adult’s gaze towards itself, to this figure, which reaches to lost past and not-yet-here future, all at the same time.

Innocence as a sign of race and class

The innocent child, fabricated in theory and in visual images, has become a powerful representation. Most fashion advertisements representing children draw from this narrative figure. Innocence connects specific meanings to images and communicates that a child is a creature in need of play, affection, attention and protection from adults and society. Innocence is also important to adults: an innocent-looking child tells other adults that the child is being cared for. Meanings that we attach to innocence are constructed and fixed by representational conventions (Hall 1997). Every time we talk, think, write, imagine or picture “childhood innocence”, the convention of representation conjures up certain kinds of signs, concepts and images about childhood – much like the ones of jumping children represented in the Dior advertisements. These conventions inform us that in the Western visual culture, “childhood innocence” is represented through certain shared signs and conventions in visual language. Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meanings, which are not created in the present, but have a history and a historical context even though the present representation might add something to the meaning.

It is also true that every time we talk, see, write, imagine or picture “childhood innocence”, other meanings also arise, for example that children are in opposition to adults and that adults have power over children. This aspect is present especially when children’s innocence is challenged

by innocence's other: sexuality. This is the case even if sexuality has always accompanied innocence as a counter image. In fact, it is especially the combination of innocence and sexuality that constructs representations of childhood so appealing and powerful. In order to make the theoretical idea concrete, let's look at another example from Dior, this time from around 2007.



Image 3

Innocent or sexual? The Dior advertisement plays with both codes, making the image all the more alluring.

In this advertisement, we see a little girl sitting on a pearl grey Louis XV chair in a white room (Image 3). The props associate to the 19th century bourgeoisie, communicating meanings of the luxury brand with a culturally prestigious history, and of the girl representing an upper middle class life-style. The little girl dangles a white teddy bear between her legs. The teddy bear evokes meanings familiar from the concept of the bourgeois Romantic child: play is children's work. Her half-sitting pose and the teddy bear between her legs communicate tiredness. It is as if the picture was a snapshot: it captures the moment when the little girls became tired and wanted to sit on the nearest chair to rest. Expressing tiredness in the

middle of play is a sign that is read as emerging from children's innocence – children sleeping in parties or in public is an everyday sight. But more than this, there is another visual-material element, which contributes to reading the image as innocence: the color white. The room is white, the teddy bear is white, and she is dressed in white. The art historian John Gage (1999) has indicated that white is specifically a children's color: it symbolizes purity, joy, virginity and innocence. In early Christian art, angels and Jesus were always draped in white in order to communicate their innocence and purity. And later, during the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, middle-class mothers were advised to dress their children in white clothes, because it symbolized children's innocence (Kaiser & Huun 2002: 191).

Even though this advertisement was published in the *Vogue Bambini* special theme issue “white” indicating that white was the fashionable color for the season, the meanings that the Dior advertisement communicates travel beyond that, to the history of white's connection to race and class. In the 19th century Victorian era, religious connotations were secularized and became signs of middle-class respectability. Women became “angels of the household”, whose beauty was to emanate from within and not made with artificial make-up or extravagant clothing. It also connected to issues of race, as Richard Dyer (2010: 127) has explained:

The white woman as angel was [...] both the symbol of white virtuousness and the last word in the claim that what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities.

Another British scholar, sociologist Beverly Skeggs (1997) has written about the formation of middle class, which main component is respectability (see also Sennett 1978, Egan & Hawkes 2010). She explains that respectability, which is a spiritual quality, had to be somehow estimated. In this process, clothes and bodily gestures became valuable sources of information (see also Ribeiro 1986/2003, Finch 1993). “Respectable clothing” was not only white; it was also modest and hid the body. “Too revealing” and colorful clothing, on the other hand, was read as a sign of degeneracy, impropriety and immorality, and associated to working and lower classes. Respectability of women and innocence of children became categories that could be measured, organized and defined through looking at women and children's bodies, clothes and behavior.

Ambiguous innocence

Innocence and respectability are concepts that link to the birth of the controlling and classing gaze during the 19th century (Finch 1993: 10). It was, in turn, connected to the “birth” of the modern sexual child (Egan & Hawkes 2010). Innocence was not static or unchanging; rather it was fragile and corruptible, which meant that children’s innocence needed to be controlled. One of the main concerns during the 19th century was masturbation: purity advocates and medical establishment were concerned with its “dangerous impact” on children’s character and advocated “enlightened innocence” and the end of sexual ignorance (Egan & Hawkes 2010: 33–34, Laqueur 2003, Sedgwick 1991: 818–837). Children were educated in purity with techniques involving suppression of sexual impulses through the imposition of morality and rational will. Innocence was not merely seen as an inner quality: it was seen as a virtue that must be taught. Innocence was thus there and not there – it was present and at the same time it was also absent. The child was like a chameleon, which shifted between sentimentality and suspicion, i.e. between a figure of innocence in need of protection and a figure of potential corruption in need of control. The connection between childhood and innocence has always been paradoxical (Cross 2004, Jenkins 2004, Kincaid 1998).

The Dior advertisement is representative of this kind of double exposure: it draws from the history of innocence but it also draws from the history of the modern sexual child. Paradoxically enough, the history of the sexual child comes also forth through the advertisement’s dazzling whiteness: the image and the clothes are so white that the supposed invisible whiteness of the little girl’s skin color becomes visible. Compared to her clothes and the rest of the props, she is not white at all: she is colored. White dress makes her body visible and material and cancels out her incorporeality. In fact: her red hair color, blasé expression, and direct gaze out of the picture straight at the viewer are signs that make her embodied. As Richard Dyer (2010) shows, to be non-white or colored is to be embodied and sexual. Further, red and red hair have been associated with fire, passion, love, blood, violence, witchcraft, active sexuality, and prostitution (Gage 1999). The little girl’s face is also made-up, another non-innocent quality, and her gaze, directed at the viewer, indicates that she is not immersed in her childhoodness. Instead, the girl looks directly at the viewer with her lips slightly ajar – a sign associated to seductiveness. The whole arrangement of the advertisement reproduces that gaze, which is familiar

from women's fashion advertising or even more explicitly, from erotic men's magazines and straight male pornography. The Dior advertisement draws thus from stereotype of the receptive and seductive girl and transforms the angelic girl into a little Lolita.

The duality of innocence and sexuality gained its peak during the 19th century Victorian era (Egan & Hawkes). It idealized sexual innocence and considered children's sexuality as forbidden and as alluring. This dualism produced the pure and virginal middle class child, who was sentimentalized in art and literature (Higonnet & Albinson 1997: 119–144). But it also crafted its counterpart, the sexual child, which was increasingly used as a validation for surveillance of working class and poor families, and which also represented in art and literature (Egan & Hawkes 2010, Kehily & Montgomery 2004: 61–62). Innocence needs non-innocence, or, as the British scholar Valerie Walkerdine (1997: 256) points out, the Western imagination has always maintained the erotization of children. The antecedents of the Dior advertisement consist of Reynolds and his contemporaries' paintings of innocent children, but they also consist of for example Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings of adolescent girls with often flaming red hair and lips and cinematic, photographic, literary and painted portrayals of little girls such as Alice Liddell, Shirley Temple, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Sally Mann's photographs of her own children. In these high art and popular representations little girls have charm, which appeals to adults. Thus, alongside the innocent child, there has always been a recognized fascination and acknowledgement of children's sexuality. The Dior advertisement is a contemporary and commodified reproduction of that.

Ultimately, then, the Dior advertisements ritualize, commodify and fetishize the play on childhood innocence and sexuality and transform childhood into spectacular enjoyment. In "old-school" feminist words: the fashion advertisements position children in the stereotypical place as the fetishized passive objects of the adult gaze, and as such they are merely another loop in the chain of representations of children in popular culture (e.g. Mulvey on women 1975/1989: 14–26). The advertisements suggest that children are there for the visual pleasure of the adult spectator, and come to reflect, reveal and play on the socially established difference between adults and children. The Dior advertisements arise from the skillful manipulation of this discursive, historical and visual opposition.

But are these children then merely there for the adult to enjoy? What do we need these advertisements for?

Virgin fantasies

In our culture vision and visuality have become keywords – we live in a visual culture, where we mostly encounter and consume commercially produced images. In such a culture, innocence is not only a particular form of visuality. It is a commodified and fetishized form of visuality. Advertising has especially enhanced the commodification of childhood since it has changed the way in which human figures are represented as symbols for something else. In her classical analysis, *Decoding Advertising* (1978), Judith Williamson shows that advertising transfers Marxist commodity fetishism beyond metaphor. She claims that advertising is a discrete form of fetishism, “capable of transforming the language of objects to that of the people” (Ibid.: 12). This means that advertising provides us with a structure, where commodities become interchangeable with people. Advertising transfers the language of clothes to that of children. Advertising sells childhood, both innocent and sexual.

The Dior advertisements, like so many of their kinsfolk, are ambivalent mixtures of virginal innocence and corporeal sensuality. Virginity is a particularly apt concept here: unlike innocence, its core is sexuality. Virgin is a person, who has no sexual history. A virgin is free from sexuality even though the loss of virginity awaits somewhere in the future. Even though virginity refers technically to hymen and it is a concept most often referring to girls, it is also a broader sign of inexperience (Blank 2007, Driscoll 2002). The difference of experience and inexperience is visible in the conceptual contrast between the adult and the child, and simulated variously in cultural representations such as children’s fashion advertising. Thus, the children in the Dior advertisements are stagings of the long tradition of virginal and sexual representations. They play with the ambivalence and liminality of virginal innocence; the space between innocence and non-innocence; making the advertisements all the more alluring.

The commodity culture apparently needs virginity of childhood, and this is one reason for the popularity of innocent children. Sigmund Freud (1918/1964: 193) writes in his essay “The Taboo of Virginity” that virginity is needed in patriarchal order, because it assures the “logical continuation of the right to possession of a woman”. While women have gained more power in the Western culture, the burden of being possessed has trickled down to childhood. The innocence of children is a sign of adults’ right to possess children. This imbalance in power transforms the inno-

cent/virginal child into a fetish image by highlighting the child's supposed pre-sexual identity. Paradoxically: an innocent child is an emblem of availability. The Dior advertisements are examples of the way in which fashion industry circulates this ambivalent figure in marketing.

Pedophilia of everyday life

But there is more than just commodity fetishism: that of sexual politics. Children's fashion advertising presumes and participates in the construction of a viewing subject. In fact, the "photographic contract" (Fuss 1992: 713), which advertising is based on, operates as a cultural mechanism, which crafts the innocent, and therefore all the more desirable child (Kincaid 1998). Some feminists such as American Jessica Valenti have written that the biggest problem is not the sexual child. Rather, far more dangerous is the myth of the innocent child, because it puts impossible standards of purity on children, especially girls. According to Valenti (2010: 10):

What are girls left with? Abstinence-only education during the day and Girls Gone Wild commercials at night! [...] We are teaching American girls that, one way or another, their bodies and sexuality are what make them valuable. The sexual double standard is alive and well, and it is irrevocably damaging young girls.

This double standard is clearly visible in children's fashion advertising, which poses the innocent child as an irresistible subject. Innocence and virginity invite adults to consume the advertised products visually through the body of the child model that is made desirable. In fact, the entire children's fashion industry operates as one of those institutionalized arenas, which represents eroticized images of children, which adults can look at without sanctioning.³ Fashion advertising provides a structure of gaze, where adults – both women and men – are encouraged to consume the image of the child, who is represented classically as innocent and therefore as erotically titillating. Adults, who gaze at children, it seems, participate in what Richard D. Mohr (2004: 17–30) calls "pedophilia of everyday life".

³ I do not mean this in a totalising way. On controversies around children's representations, see Angelides 2011 forthcoming, Vänskä 2011 forthcoming.

With this concept, Mohr does not refer to actual real-life pedophiles. Instead, he writes about an imaginary figure or a symbol and states that the innocent child is needed for maintaining the “normal social order”. Sexually alluring representations, which Mohr calls “pedophilic representations” are ones in which “youthfulness sexualizes the image and in turn the image enhances the sexiness of youth” (Mohr 2004: 20). Following this logic, the Dior advertisements are sexual merely because they represent virginal children: taboo figures. Because innocence is taboo, it enhances the sexiness of children in general – and fuels the market as a consequence. Fetishized innocence and the figure of the pedophile are needed so that the rest of the population can gaze at images of children innocently.

Ultimately this means that an image is never pedophilic per se. It is only the “perverted” mind of the beholder, which has the power to turn an image into pedophilic. The sexualized representations of children separate the pedophile from “us”, the normal viewers, who have nothing to do with a desire for little children (Mohr 2004: 23). Dior advertising is part of that iconographic repertoire, which functions as the force for innocence and protects everyone from becoming a pedophile. The reason why children in fashion advertising look so sexy is linked to adult anxiety of pedophilia and its resolution. In Freudian (1928: 161–166) terms: adults deal with the pedophilic anxiety by turning the figure of the child into a fetish object.

The nostalgic value of innocence

What is the ultimate meaning of innocence for consumer culture? One answer is that they hark back to a nostalgic past, supposedly an innocent and pure state of being outside of adult concerns and commodities. Of course, this past is merely an image. The French media philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1981/1998: 60–100) has described contemporary Western capitalist societies as cultures of simulation. With simulation he refers to an idea that signs have become autonomous and independent of any products or people. As such they do not refer to any reality outside them, but to other signs, other images, other products. Baudrillard sees that post-industrial societies have entered a new stage of production, where all production is fetishized into an abstract process: there are no real commodities, no real people, and no real world. What we have, is a world of fetishized media signs, which only refer to other fetishized media signs.

The innocent child is a product of fetishizing adult gaze. The Dior advertisements testify this and show that childhood is a particularly profitable frontier for global capitalism. At the same time, the advertisements also testify that childhood innocence is a profitable product of commodity fetishism. The figure of the child is the latest fetish image, informed by the history of the innocent and sexual child and the economic logic of post-Fordist capitalism. The purpose of representations of innocent children in fashion advertising is to make products appear sexy and desirable.

But the innocent child is not only this. The interest in the innocent child also represents a wish for adults' lost innocence. This makes the figure of the innocent child a perfect simulation: it functions as a Baudrillardian sign in late modernity's attempt to re-adopt innocence through the nostalgic figure of the child (Jenks 1996: 106). Within fashion advertising, the representation of the innocent child implies a longing for the past and makes sense of the affectionate intensity that the innocent child mobilizes.

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