

Cinematic representations of boyhood sexual abuse, 1967-2006

Todd Taylor BBus BComm (Hons)

Thesis submitted for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

of the University of Canberra

Faculty of Arts and Design

June 2011

Abstract

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence and continued growth of cinematic representations of adult-child sexual relations. This emergence coincided with changes to both the regulatory environment in which film operated and societal problematics around adult-child sexual relations. How has film treated this new subject matter?

A common-sense assumption is that film contributes to dominant ideologies, such as discourses of childhood innocence. James Kincaid, for instance, has theorised that through a convergence between cultural discourses of childhood and sexual innocence, children are paradoxically constructed as erotically appealing and erotically vacant. For him, film contributes to this construction of childhood. This thesis will argue that cinematic representations of adult-child sexual relations provide a more nuanced perspective.

Drawing on formalist and genre analysis, I will examine two cycles that have predominated the cinematic representation of adult-child sexual relations. The first cycle, which peaked between 1967 and 1988, has been labeled the coming-of-age narrative in film studies, medico-psychological and feminist literature. This narrative features sexually agentic children. These children are complex characters but so too are the adults they interact with. In this cycle, childhood is not necessarily more or less innocent than adulthood. The second cycle, which peaked between 1985 and 2006, comprises films involving the witnessing of adult-child sexual relations. Both adults and children are witnesses. These witnesses are also complex characters, who, in this cycle, are torn between innocence and complicity. This cycle does not advocate adult-child sexual relations, but, again, childhood is not necessarily more or less innocent than adulthood.

I will argue that film cannot be seen as a simple vehicle for dominant ideologies. One explanation for the shift between these two cycles is the rise of the broad social concern over child sexual abuse. Through historically contextualising this shift, however, I will suggest that the relationship between discourses of child sexual abuse and cinematic representations of adult-child sexual relations is complex. Film is a commercial medium that is principally in competition with television as well as emerging media such as videogames and the internet. During the mid-1980s, the television industry within the US underwent profound structural changes, which, in part, contributed to made-for-TV movies depicting child sexual abuse that privileged parenthood. I will suggest that cinema responded by privileging the non-parent.

In sum, the original contribution of this thesis is not an argument of how film supports hegemonic discourses of childhood innocence, but how film, as a commercial medium that targets distinct audience groups—in particular youth—within a competitive mediascape, complicates these discourses of childhood innocence. Of course, film is not alone in this regard. Popular music, the music video, videogames and *YouTube* may provide other sites of nuance. In conclusion, I will suggest that further research should be directed at the latter because it has the potential of contributing to new audiences and cultural discourses of adult-child sexual relations.

Certificate of authorship of thesis

Except where clearly acknowledged in footnotes, quotations and the bibliography, I certify that I am the sole author of the thesis submitted today entitled –

Cinematic representations of boyhood sexual abuse, 1967-2006

I further certify that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

The material in the thesis has not been the basis of an award of any other degree or diploma except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

The thesis complies with University requirements for a thesis as set out in

<http://www.canberra.edu.au/secretariat/goldbook/forms/thesisrqmt.pdf>

.....

Signature of candidate

.....

Signature of chair of the supervisory panel

.....

Date

Acknowledgements

Associate Professor Paul Magee has treated my work with respect and has offered invaluable feedback and criticism.

Thanks to the University of Canberra who contributed to this study with an APA scholarship, an RTS position and a waiver of fees while I worked on resubmitting this thesis.

Finally, thanks to my original examiners. Your feedback was insightful, intelligent and appropriate. It was a privilege to even be able to submit the thesis to you for examination.

Table of contents

Abstract	ii
Certificate of authorship of thesis	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The theoretical context: childhood studies	3
1.2.1 The emergence of childhood.....	4
1.2.2 The emergence of discourses of innocence	6
1.2.3 The convergence of childhood innocence and sexual innocence	8
1.2.4 The contemporary problematic of erotic innocence	12
1.2.5 The Gothic narrative	20
1.3 My problematic.....	22
1.3.1 <i>Bad education</i> (La mala educación, 2004)	23
1.3.2 Structure of this research	29
Chapter 2: Methodology.....	33
2.1 Introduction	33
2.2 Sampling strategy	33
2.3 Strategy for the analysis of film	43
2.3.1 Review of categories in existing literature.....	44
2.3.2 Application of categories from existing literature	54
2.3.3 Identification of peak films and cultural trends	57
2.3.4 Historical contextualisation of trends	60
2.3.5 Formal analysis of selected films.....	61
2.4 Conclusion	66
Chapter 3: Coming of age (1967-1988)	67
3.1 Introduction	67
3.2 Previous literature on the coming-of-age film.....	68
3.3 Film censorship and regulation.....	70
3.3.1 The pre-Production and Production Code eras	70
3.3.2 Classification and the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA) ratings system	77

3.4 Cinematic explorations of coming of age.....	81
3.4.1 <i>The graduate</i> (1967)	82
3.4.2 <i>Murmur of the heart</i> (Le soufflé an cœur, 1971).....	101
3.4.3 <i>The last picture show</i> (1971).....	117
3.4.4 <i>The tin drum</i> (Die blechtrommel, 1979)	142
3.4.5 <i>Private lessons</i> (1981).....	168
3.4.6 <i>My tutor</i> (1983).....	181
3.4.7 <i>Big</i> (1988)	187
3.5 Discussion.....	196
Chapter 4: Witnessing (1985-2006)	201
4.1 Introduction	201
4.2 Cycles of ‘child sexual abuse’	201
4.2.1 Second wave feminism	205
4.2.2 Therapeutic culture	207
4.2.3 Gay and paedophilic rights movements.....	213
4.2.4 Socio-economic disruptions.....	217
4.3 Contemporary constructions of childhood innocence	220
4.4 Child sexual abuse and television.....	226
4.4.1 The emergence of the made-for-TV movie	227
4.4.2 The decline of the made-for-TV genre	232
4.4.3 Child sexual abuse in made-for-TV movies	237
4.5 Regulatory changes: US <i>Child Pornography Prevention Act 1996</i>	246
4.6 Cinematic representations of child sexual abuse.....	248
4.6.1 <i>Back to the future</i> (1985)	249
4.6.2 <i>The Prince of Tides</i> (1991)	265
4.6.3 <i>Sleepers</i> (1996)	273
4.6.4 <i>The war zone</i> (1999)	284
4.6.5 <i>The butterfly effect</i> (2004).....	302
4.6.6 <i>Mysterious skin</i> (2004).....	322
4.6.7 <i>Notes on a scandal</i> (2006)	336
4.7 Discussion.....	342
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	358
5.1 Introduction	358

5.2 New stories	358
5.3 New audiences	363
References	371
Academic literature.....	371
Filmography.....	386
Other films cited	402
Websites cited.....	403
Appendix	404
List of circuits of desire films.....	404
List of coming-of-age films	404
List of faunlet films	406
List of investigative films	406
List of trauma films	407
List of witnessing films	408
List of films not categorised	409