

PUERILITIES/MASCULINITIES: INTRODUCING A SPECIAL ISSUE ON BOYISH TEMPORALITIES

“Puerilism knows no ages, it attacks young and old alike.”
(Huizinga, 1935 [1972, p. 159])

“The figure of the spoil-sport is most apparent in boys’ games.”
(Huizinga, 1938 [1980, p. 11])

Pioneering cultural historian Johan Huizinga’s short chapter on *puerilism*, featured in his interwar essay *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, famously highlighted what he considered the mutual “contamination of play and seriousness in modern life.” “Puerilism we shall call the attitude of a community whose behaviour is more immature than the state of its intellectual and critical faculties would warrant, which instead of making the boy into the man adapts its conduct to that of the adolescent age” (Huizinga, 1935 [1936, p. 170]). The puerilist condition degrades the serious to the superficial, true and ritual play to boundless childishness. It is a dangerous and decadent symptom, a “bastardization of culture,” a semi-seriousness and appetite for the sensational and the trivial appealing to obedient masses and small minds. Modern man becomes a slave to his comforts. “In his world full of wonders man is like a child in a fairy tale. He can travel through the air, speak to another hemisphere, have a continent delivered in his home by radio. He presses a button and life comes to him. Will such a life give him maturity?”

While Huizinga’s thesis has been dismissed as too despairing to be useful (see Smith, 1975, pp. 9-49), sociologists and psychologists of the 1990s would make a lot of what he prophetically called Western civilization’s “permanent adolescence.” In

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keeping with changing times, discussions cross-faded gradually from Man-and-Civilization to men-and-masculinities. The reader will find already in David Kirby's 1991 study *Boyishness in American Culture* an illustrative (though forgotten) update to Huizinga (Huizinga explicitly located egregious puerilism in the U.S.). A more recent one is Gary Cross's *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (2008). With these follow-ups, with terms passing from the *puerile* into the *boyish*, we feel the rising expectancy of a precise psychologizing and gendering that Huizinga explicitly, if inefficiently, resisted.¹ Perhaps inevitably, with the falling away of the masculine generic, with world wars and world-shattering fascism gone, but urged on by the enduring need for American cultural diagnostics, anti-*puerilist* sentiments found their way into discourses on "masculinity," eventually on varieties of "young masculinities." And the latter remain the pulse of national maturity.

What can be achieved, however, if we look upon *the puerile* while, as Huizinga, putting gender and age on hold? If we strip it from its current demographic encumberings, and see it in the context of "the play function" Huizinga set out to examine? Doing so, might we not end up with something that could illuminate precisely how today's demographic gaze has been encumbering life and studies? Are there ways to encumber "genders" without taking them as starting points, and could we pull the same trick on "maturities"? As has been alluded to by many, *queerness* and *puerility* partake considerably in the other's pejorative connotations, in a way deserving of more extensive historical and anthropological reflection than is presently available. Queer has a long history of being figured precisely as *puerilist*—as stagnant, over-refined, antisocial, futureless, spineless; a permanent self-centered silliness; a cultural symptom of stasis, regression, fixation; a catastrophic and contagious confusion of otherwise complementary and productive functions; a trivialization and perverting, lastly, of purpose and conquest, all lost to clubs, badges, marches, and slogans, to distraction and the cultivation of idiosyncratic, idle pleasures.

"Western civilization" frowns upon *puerilities*—incarnations and avatars of the *puerilist* condition—as it has long frowned upon queers. Huizinga died well before gender and sex became endemically playful, but I venture his work on *homo ludens* presents interesting reading material for sexologists and queer theorists alike. Three of modern gender/sexuality's key hauntings—the pervert, the promiscuous, and the immature—seem subject to the same dread for the trivialization of sex as the pristine covenant between the sexes. Sex means little if not on the whole taken *au sérieux*—or (which is only a more specific case of the same) if not, indeed, on the whole, taking place *between the sexes*. In *sexualibus*, there is a straightforward importance to being earnest. To play sincerely as one should, one must understand the vital rules and then, at least while in view of the referees, follow them within the closed arena of the game. Any playful departure from this core etiquette shall prove traumatic, diseased, contagious, criminal. Too much play, or play all over, means

¹ The book is the oldest of twenty titles currently indexed by its press, Edwin Mellen, as falling within the subject area of *Boys' Studies*.

game over. Or so it appeared to Huizinga: “The most fundamental characteristic of true play, whether it be a cult, a performance, a contest, or a festivity, is that at a certain moment it is *over*.”² There is too much play, too much dressing up all the time, with kids and queers; and so their risqué games figure easily as pure rule-violation, as the surest sign of the downfall of society.

While age and gender presently interest us more than Huizinga, his interest in “a fundamental change of a moral-psychological nature” may make for a suitable sidestep of the men-and-masculinities claim to mature studies. Even Huizinga admits *puerilism* to be an ethnographic question rather than an ascertained symptom: “It would be interesting to investigate how in the different languages the words for play continually overflow into the sphere of the serious.” How boyish, immature, or masculine is Civilization’s (or heterosexuality’s) trivialization? How (pre)Oedipal, or American, is puerilism? Is there reason to ponder the off-hand suggestion that “The term has nothing to do with that of infantilism in psychoanalysis” (Huizinga, 1936, p. 170)? Do puerilists under-organize or over-organize their desktops? Why not wear badges? Why is it that the one arguable puerilist can play and play endlessly, make a fortune in play — while the other cannot?

The five articles that make up this special issue of *Thymos* touch upon these questions and others. They were among the responses to a call for queer/critical contributions to the field of boyhood studies. The CfP’s scope was deliberately broad, in tune with the breadth of viewpoints welcomed since the journal was launched in 2007. The variety of submissions happily reflected the contemporary variety of critical inroads to young masculinities.³

Theoretical exuberance needs to be celebrated where cultivated; it also needs to be commemorated where almost forgotten. If queer theory was importantly the scene of doing theory around gender “after psychoanalysis,” it has been an eager witness and celebrated accomplice to the fact that psychoanalysis has for some time had to reckon with a plethora of ways to behold Man (Moss, 2012). It is not least within psychoanalysis that boyhood emerges, accordingly, as a new plural for the pondering (Corbett, 2009). A late child of the 20th century, queer theory’s intellectual eventfulness has importantly been informed by the revisiting of psychoanalysis, especially via Lacan’s return to Freud but also elaborating Michel Foucault’s, Gilles Deleuze’s, and Guy Hocquenghem’s interventions, to name only the more thoroughly discussed. Psychodynamic theory, in its epochal orthodoxy, figured mature life as the legacy of formative trauma, uncertain separations and correspondingly tentative identifications: a plane of opaque imbrications of obscure past and timid present. Out of this core intuition, various competing figurations of child-infant emerged alongside various conjunctive figurations of child-adolescent. The latter’s aura, Huizinga saw, was to become something of an organizing presence in late capitalism, with pretty silly consequences here and there, but of course way too

² Another threat would be *over-organization*, as where gamers and athletes take themselves too seriously. This caveat seems to gain relevance across the civilized world.

³ I thank all submitters, including those of whom manuscripts could not be placed in the current issue — typically due to considerations other than intellectual merit.

dynamic, colorful, and open-ended consequences to be pitted en bloc against Civilization.

As many before and since, Foucault, Deleuze (with Félix Guattari), and Hocquenghem (with René Schérer) returned to the familial, Oedipal, constellation that defined and contained the playful child, indeed along a number of critical tangents that American queer theory, in a less playsome timeframe and on another continent, was to restrict considerably (e.g., Janssen, 2012). Yet queer theory's ponderous departures from psychoanalysis, figuring prominently in canonical work by Judith Butler, Leo Bersani, and Lee Edelman, necessarily entailed continued reflection on this child-loving and child-rearing constellation—its generative anxieties, its normal products and plots, its preferred enemies. From the febrile anti-Oedipal into the volatile post-Oedipal scene, the child still orients the movement of Society and still presides over the sociable. It is still very much in the game.

It has been rewarding, notwithstanding, to observe that alleged determinations of "sex" (its natures, implications, and limits) have been a constant rhetorical accompaniment of alleged determinations of "the child" (its lure and legacies, its formative phases and tasks, its primal seductions and traumas). Perversely but undeniably, it is impossible to look at modern sex and not look at the modern child, and it is impossible to look at either and not look at the broader ramifications of the social and the familial that wed, and too often *condemn*, the one to the other. It seems that virtually all stalemated forms of sexual politics around the world today may be instantly revitalized by being routed through the figure of the compromised (*harmed, recruited, groomed*) child. In a way that will fascinate sociologists for generations to come, the nature of sex has become perversely coextensive with its natural disjunction from childhood. Yet even children's Nature has had to tolerate important challenges to its purported singularity, as Affrica Taylor (2013) ventures in a recent book.

Unsurprisingly, almost a quarter of a century of queer theory has been spotting "the child" on its many horizons. In ways that, again, beg for cross-cultural reflection, the child is typically seen to lurk at some yonder plane, at the same time it urges to be observed in the rear mirror—either way never too readily within reach but always accommodating to the desperate gaze. One can hardly underestimate the centrality of pondering this kind of split vision to queer theory's core projects. Animated by the increasingly familiar keyword of *temporalities*, queer theory's pondering seems divided up not least between spirited futurology, austere presentism, and audacious re-readings. Likewise, one has never had to go far to discern both due commemoration and distressing amnesia near the heart of much writing on gender and sexualities.

The leitmotifs of time and timing are rendered all the more salient by contemporary allegations that in its early 20s, queer theory has "run its course" (Penney, forthcoming). Insiders recall that *in memoriams* were being voiced even in queer theory's infancy (O'Rourke, 2011). Notwithstanding, "queer" now has a history to answer for, and it is definitely interesting to see studies being published about "The Politics of Age, Temporality and Intergenerationality" within contemporary LGBTQ frameworks themselves (Binnie & Klesse, 2013). Perhaps inevitable but surely long awaited, age, maturity, and generationality have sporadically moved

from a proposed to a more directly probed centrality across the humanities. The outcome may be unsettling, if we appreciate the impression that “to include the child in any field of study is to realign the very structure of the field, changing the terms of inquiry and forcing a different set of questions” (“Introduction” to Duane, ed., 2013, p. 1). This certainly is a poignant remark if one considers sexology to be one of modernity’s prestigious—even signature—fields of study. Today, of course, many of the questions one could feel forced to ask are already comprehensively answered by legal and medical definitions of the good life. Still, it seems inescapable, at least across the humanities, that

we must critically assess our own scholarly and intellectual attachments to the privileges allotted to adulthood, a position propped up by the preservation of an imagined child who is “naturally” unable to access the realms of consent, resistance, and agency. (*ibid.*, p. 12)

Doing so, familiar questions will have to be posed anew. *What exactly is the trouble with age?*, asks Leerom Medovoi (2010). *What age is desire?*, Stephen Hartman (2013) asks, introducing a special issue of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*. Organizers of a recent three-day workshop on “The Queerness of Childhood” summed up emergent queer stakes in childhood studies where setting out to encounter the child as

a critical tool, a political trope, an affective field, a site of cultural production and consumption, a psychoanalytic subject, and a living, breathing historical personage to whom we are ethically beholden: a figure for both queer political possibility (Jack Halberstam) and political or symbolic death ([Lee] Edelman). (*Worlds of Wonder*, 2013, n.p.)

Erica Burman adds that “[n]arratives of gendered childhood remain a key arena by which political, as well psychic, formations of the past are produced” (2012, p. 310). It is thus of primary interest to see how such narratives operate, not least within the context of academic commentary. Máirtín Mac an Ghaill and Chris Hayward, for instance, note that within the field of education, empirical engagement may have to actively resist straightjacketing by the conceptual apparatus that has sprung up around “masculinities” over the past quarter of a century (“hegemony,” not least). Research on male pupil cultures leads them to look at masculinity and femininity as they operate as “a dualism that through its [notably academic] deployment simplifies the complex specificities and intricacies of boys’ and young men’s social and cultural worlds” (2012, p. 70).

With this dual sense of conceptual and empirical wonder, the reader should be well equipped to encounter this special issue’s contributions. In them, the contours of boyhood are notably drawn and redrawn by modes of return and redeployment, through memory, theory, boy book, installation, film, zine, interview. In “Queer Sensations: Postwar American Melodrama and the Crisis of Queer Juvenility,” CAEL KEEGAN (*this issue*) examines how the young homosexual body emerges into representation in American postwar popular culture. Comparing *Rebel Without a Cause*

and *Tea and Sympathy* Keegan observes in each film the admission of the possibility of a queer juvenility perused as melodramatic prop in a wider historical effort “to sort male youth along a developmental trajectory into heterosexual adulthood.” This sorting is achieved through the figuration of a White developmental citizenship secured by the hard-won rejection of unfit homosexual tendencies, even, if need be, the invocation of female tutoring. The “queer sensation scene” deployed to these ends, Keegan continues, can be traced even in much more recent, if notably evolved, films such as *Brokeback Mountain*.

The ensuing article covers the revisitations of teenage masculinity by an artist who, incidentally, is known for playing the title character in a 2001 TV biographical film on *James Dean*. In “*The Dangerous Book Four Boys: James Franco’s Psychosexual Artistic Explorations of Boyhood*,” DINAH HOLTZMAN (*this issue*) interprets Franco’s 2010 debut solo exhibition (curated by Alanna Heiss and Beatrice Johnson) as the artist’s revisiting and reworking of themes of masculinity, adolescence, homosociality, sexual discovery and domesticity. The article unravels the suspension of engagements with boyhood culture between Franco’s childhood, his early career as a teen actor, and his current vantage points as actor/artist/director. Holtzman also provides a Kleinian reading of Franco’s homages to Faulkner, abject artist Paul McCarthy, and finally his father, and scrutinizes his fascination with timeless iconic youthful rebels.

In “Mapping the (Adolescent) Male Body: Queerness, Pedophilia and Perversion in *L.I.E.* and *Mysterious Skin*,” SARAH SINWELL (*this issue*) closely examines two films tackling the fraught subject of pedophilia from a queer theoretical perspective, identifying the “network of nodes of identification” opened up between the coordinates of perversion, queerness, and adolescence. Sinwell critically unpacks both films, finding that both “map” perversion on the male adolescent body, but precisely as the undifferentiated amalgamation of sexual insubordinations connoted by that term—*perversion* conflating incest, pedophilia, homosexuality. The young body itself, its potentially queer becoming, finally its sexual becoming per se, risk becoming perverse, unutterable, erased. It is by “Grasping, envisioning, and experiencing [...] boyhood sexual desire via identificatory cinematic techniques,” Sinwell proposes, that we may discern “a mode of understanding how we might traverse between the categories of the normal and perverse” (p. 151).

MARTY FINK’S article (*this issue*), entitled “‘Shaped Like an Anchor’: Trans Sailors and Cultures of Resistance,” undertakes to encounter the trans sailor as “an emblem for re-imagining boyhood as an embodiment to be refashioned by queer and gender nonconforming adults toward challenging ongoing practices of racialization and colonial manhood” (p. 157). Expanding on previous work (notably by Michelle Ann Abate and Bobby Noble), Fink’s essay draws from a triptych of cultural texts—a DIY zine, an experimental film, and a classic Baldwin novel—in which figurations of trans boys allow for “transgressive new temporal passages for queer coming of age.” Specific deployments of the iconography of the sailor (“a liminal body that refuses the progression out of boyhood that arcs toward traditional war-faring maleness”), according to Fink, open up “a space for bodies that resist conventional masculinities by assuming embodiments of boyhood” (p. 160). Moreover, where *liminality* is taken to extend to shorelines, ports and promontories, reading

the sailor anew secures “novel representational possibilities for the transnational or diasporic queer body.” Ultimately, “Reading the nautical boy body as a form of queerness that can be envisioned apart from White male adult masculinity and apart from homonationalisms and colonial projects could also expand the potential of the sailor as an icon for queerness itself” (p. 170).

Concluding this issue, OLIVER PENNY’S “Negative Repetition: Masochism in Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Folding Star*” traces the intricate psychodynamic role of masochism in the formation of gay male subjectivity by reading together key texts by Freud and recently deceased psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche. Penny pursues themes of nostalgia, guilt, identification and loss in Alan Hollinghurst’s 1994 novel, *The Folding Star*, especially as they inform its protagonist Edward Manners’ relationship with his father. It is Edward’s inability to tap into less controlling and more enduring (more “masochistic”) ways of inhabiting sexual desire that informs the novel’s plot, finds Penny—a finding with rich implications for artistic returns and transferential encounters.

The articles included in the present issue problematize *the puerile* in variable terms of the allocation and sorting of postwar developmental citizenship (Keegan); installations of screens, memories, and screenings (Holtzman); bodies as projective screens for figurations of the perverse (Sinwell); a comparative semiology of trans embodiment (Fink); finally a reading, a sensitivity, for defensive repetitions and melancholic preservations when encountering passionate men (Penny). I trust these contributions will prove of use in discerning *puerilities* and *puerilisms* among and alongside *masculinities* and *masculinisms*. If 20th century *puerilism* could alternatively be assessed as “the failure of the civilization of thymotic energies on all fronts” (Sloterdijk, 2010, p. 25) surely *Thymos* will at least already sound like an eligible place to take up such “psychopolitical” readings.

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