

PRESUMED INNOCENT: THE PARADOX OF 'COMING OF AGE' AND THE PROBLEM OF YOUTH SEXUALITY IN *LOLITA* AND *THIRTEEN*

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Abstract: This paper uses a post-structuralist perspective to articulate the conceptual limits of the discourse of 'coming of age' as a means of examining concerns about the representation of young female sexuality in the media. Through analysis of the content and production contexts of the films *Lolita* (1997) and *Thirteen* (2003), it argues that the discourse of 'coming of age' is grounded in a contradictory logic that produces conflicting aims: a desire to preserve the innocence of youth and a simultaneous expectation that they 'grow up'. Using techniques of Derridean deconstruction, the paper examines the effects that this logic produces in terms of how key aspects of 'coming of age' contradict what the discourse sets out to determine and how this contributes to perceptions of youth sexuality as problematic. It will be shown that these conceptual contradictions remain unseen in attempts to make sense of the controversial aspects of the two films: the issue of pedophilia in *Lolita* and the problem of teenage rebellion in *Thirteen*. Importantly, the deconstructive reading suggests that it is the paradoxical underpinnings of this approach to youth identity that enables the discourse to be thought at all. By working to recognise this, it is possible to move beyond the limits of the discourse and think differently about youth in response to the perceived threat posed to young people by media representations of adolescent sex and sexuality.

Key words: deconstruction, youth, sexuality, media, coming of age

INTRODUCTION

This paper uses a post-structuralist perspective to articulate the conceptual limits of the discourse of 'coming of age' as a means of examining concerns about the representation of adolescent female sexuality in the media¹. As a dominant framework for studying youth identity, it will be argued that the notion of 'coming of age' is grounded in a contradictory logic that produces conflicting aims: a desire to preserve the innocence of youth and a simultaneous expectation that they 'grow up.' Techniques of Derridean deconstruction are used to intervene in this logic and point to where key aspects of 'coming of age' can be seen to contradict what the discourse sets out to determine and how this contributes to perceptions of youth sexuality as a problem.

This work is done via an analysis of two films: *Lolita* (1997) and *Thirteen* (2003); two films that have generated public concern for their depiction of adolescent sexual behaviour. Examination of the content and production contexts of these films indicates where the paradoxical elements of 'coming of age' remain unseen in attempts to make sense of the controversial aspects of each film: the issue of pedophilia in *Lolita* and the problem of teenage rebellion in *Thirteen*. Responses from critics to these films are also analysed in terms of how they work to reaffirm a normative order and so reproduce the conditions that create the conceptual conflict, even though the films carry the potential to take notions of youth identity into more productive conceptual territory. Importantly, deconstruction shows that the paradoxical underpinnings of the discourse of 'coming of age' are what enable the discourse to be thought at all. By working to recognise this, it is possible to offer a response to the perceived threat posed by media representations of sex and sexuality in relation to young people that does not reproduce the conditions for such a sense of threat to emerge.

ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY IN THE MEDIA: WHERE THE PROBLEM LIES

In May 2008, 20 photographs due for exhibition in Sydney by Australian photographer Bill Henson were seized by police in response to public complaints that the images constituted child pornography. The media coverage of this incident highlights the controversy surrounding the depiction of minors in a sexualised way. Questions were raised as to whether Henson's work brought "art" into "the realm of pornography" (Bachelard and Mangan, 2008, n.p.) and whether it involved the exploitation of his young subjects.

The NSW Director of Public Prosecutions ruled that Henson's works did not constitute child pornography and did not prosecute, however debate continued over the issues of child exploitation and "the delicate point of consent" for those under 16 years of age ("It is important," 2008, n.p.). One side of the debate focused on issues of artistic freedom and the unique power of art to express difficult human emotion and experiences. Larissa Dubecki, a columnist for *The Age*, argued that Henson grappled with "the ambiguity of teen existence" in his art and offered depictions of "the stormy adolescent interior" (2008, n.p.).

The other side of the debate expressed concern over the psychological and social

impact on the child models. Child psychologist Steve Biddulph claimed that depictions of childhood such as Henson's "takes their [children's] power and their privacy away and lets the world in" (2008, n.p.). In this way, the act of capturing innocence may paradoxically end innocence. From Biddulph's perspective, the premature sexualisation of children may force them to deal with situations beyond their mental capacity to handle, severely disrupting natural sexual development processes. "Teenage children are developmentally fragile," Biddulph argues, "they try on any number of selves, and they have to be free to do so, without adult predation on their bodies or minds" (2008, n.p.). Biddulph expresses a notion of youth as constituting a special time and space which involves both cognitive and physical development, and which is tied to identity construction. However, these processes leave youth vulnerable to potentially dangerous social or emotional influences – a vulnerability that seems to be compounded by a media culture that promotes and allows the depiction of minors in a way that foregrounds their developing bodies and budding sexuality.

The Henson case highlights a range of commonsense assumptions about youth as vulnerable and fragile, susceptible to harm, and at risk of premature development via interactions with or exposure to the media². These developmental assumptions have generated public discussions about youth on a range of issues such as corporate pedophilia³, body image pressures on girls and the influence of violent media on boys. These assumptions are often called on to explain the meaning of various youth issues and events, and the Henson case represents what is the latest in a long line of contentious issues to do so. Arguably then, the particular problem of youth sexuality in the media may lie not so much with the various events or situations that are perceived as threatening the well-being of young people but, instead, with the underlying concepts used to make sense of them. A focus on how these underlying assumptions operate seems necessary given that, despite the many calls to preserve the sexual innocence of youth and protect them from exploitation, abuse or harm, situations which appear to threaten youth continue to arise. The following discussion thus examines how dominant assumptions about youth can be seen to produce the problem of youth sexuality, and what happens when these same assumptions are used to respond to it.

'COMING OF AGE': KEY TENSIONS

In Western societies, the discourse of 'coming of age' articulates a process of maturation that young people go through in preparation for adulthood. Key developmental psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall helped develop this idea that has become the dominant system of reasoning regarding youth, naturalised over time. Hall argued that "a slow, steady coming of age" (Lesko, 2001, p. 88) would guard against precocity in the young and keep them in a more manageable state of ongoing preparation and prolonged dependency so that they could realise their "full potential" once adulthood was reached (Lesko, 2001, p. 63; Griffin, 2004, p. 12). 'Coming of age' involves the development, internalisation and consolidation of standards of social, sexual, emotional and physical conduct⁴. Education professor Nancy Lesko (2001) writes that phrases such as youth "are 'at the threshold' and in 'transition to

adulthood” accompany this time, and these imply a process of “evolutionary arrival in an enlightened state after a lengthy period of backwardness” (p. 3). Put another way, “youth cannot live in the present”; rather, they exist “in the discourse of ‘growing up’” and hence as a future presence (Lesko, 2001, p. 137). This social ‘becoming’, which also views youth as inherently unstable or in a state of lack, as seen in Biddulph’s comments, is what makes them fundamentally different from adults. But to relate the notions of identity and ‘coming of age’ is to see the latter as culminating in the achievement of a full-personhood that is stable and enduring.

However, Lesko (2001) calls attention to “the difficulty of ... securing ‘identity’ when youth are simultaneously contained within an ‘expectant mode’” (p. 123) or in a state of “perpetual becoming” (p. 63). It is this key tension that constitutes what might be called the paradox of ‘coming of age.’ The discourse describes something that is supposed to happen given the values and structures of modern society, but at the same time it is prevented from happening by those very same structures. To critically engage with the problems such contradictions bring, the paper follows with a brief overview of deconstruction and then applies a deconstructive analysis to the films *Lolita* and *Thirteen*, both of which exemplify the difficulties of making sense of youth.

DECONSTRUCTION AND PRESENCE

Understanding youth as “‘becoming’, rather than ‘being,’” and therefore as lacking a stable identity (James & James, 2004, p. 27) points us towards what the discourse of ‘coming of age’ privileges: presence. Presence marks the ideal end point of a developmental process where a self-knowing and self-present adulthood is reached. However, the notion of presence is questioned by Jacques Derrida through his deconstructive theory⁵.

Within metaphysics, the notion of presence is a fundamental concept. Presence is positioned as prior to and exterior from thought, and is understood to constitute the invariable “ground or necessary origin of thought” (Lucy, 2004, p. 76) as situated against its conceptual opposite – absence. This logic applies to all conceptual oppositions that posit an immovable truth against, and as hierarchically superior to, its other, such as nature/culture (Lucy, 2004, p. 102). This “metaphysical gesture”, according to Derrida (1988), “has been the most constant, most profound and most potent” in terms of both enabling and inscribing the limits of intelligible reality, and this is where deconstruction intervenes (p. 93). In Derrida’s (1976) words, deconstruction makes “enigmatic what one thinks one understands by ... ‘presence’” (p. 70). What is thought to exist independently in and of itself is actually dependent on that which it is opposed to; it is the secondary concept in a binary pair that enables the primary concept to be thought, such that, in a presence/absence binary, presence is always ‘breached’ or ‘split’ by absence. The key implication of this is that if there is no absolute separation between conceptual oppositions – if what counts as presence is actually dependent on its relationship to absence – then a notion of presence as original is “contradictorily coherent” (Derrida, 1978, p. 279). In other words, presence is thinkable only in its difference from itself, and

it is therefore deferred from ever being able to fully 'be' itself.

On this basis, the presumed self-presence or full-personhood of adulthood is therefore not self-evident, but always already 'less than' itself despite its appearance as whole and complete. Similarly, understanding youth according to developmental stages that are taken as a naturally occurring biological 'fact' does not mean viewing these stages as absolutely natural. That nature is knowable and thinkable within language means the concept relies on a cultural context for its meaning. So if nature is made meaningful via the determinations of discourse, then the assumed self-presence (and 'natural' authority) of adulthood is also an effect of a discourse.

As a cultural construction, then, the ideal of arriving at a stable adult identity from an unstable, yet seemingly 'natural', youth is open to reinterpretation. But in recognising this possibility and working within it, the aim is not to do away with thinking through conceptual oppositions. As Derrida (1976) argues, "there is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics" (p. 105). In order to analyse what is at stake for both youth and adults in the dominant, yet ambivalently grounded, way of thinking that characterises the discourse of 'coming of age', it is necessary to stand "on a borderline: sometimes within an uncriticised conceptuality, sometimes putting a strain on the boundaries and working toward deconstruction" (Derrida, 1976, p. 105). In applying this approach, the following discussion of *Lolita* and *Thirteen* will articulate three additional elements that comprise the first and overall tension of 'coming of age'. Specifically, the discussion points to where conceptual ambivalences are missed and therefore what is ignored in the problems raised by the paradox, and the possibility of constituting youth differently as a result is considered.

LOLITA: 'AN UNTHINKABLE ATTRACTION'⁶

The 1997 remake of *Lolita* directed by Adrian Lyne provides an excellent example of this strain of working both within and against dominant concepts in deconstructing its depiction of what is considered one of the most dangerous threats to youth in recent times: pedophilia. Based on the Vladimir Nabokov novel and following Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film version, *Lolita* tells the story of middle-aged Englishman Humbert Humbert, who falls madly in love with Lolita, the 12-year-old daughter of his landlady, in the New England summer of 1947. The film details Humbert and Lolita's five-year relationship both as stepfather and daughter and as lovers. Their sexual relationship begins somewhat playfully and is consenting, but it ends with Lolita manipulating Humbert and scheming against him, eventually leaving him to be with another older man, the mysterious Clare Quilty. Humbert is utterly destroyed by his love for Lolita. He is consumed with guilt and remorse for what he does to her, but at the same time he remains unremittingly devoted to her. A controversial film, its depiction of the sexual activity of a young teenage girl and the debate over what it should mean, goes right to the heart of the paradox of 'coming of age'.

In the West, pedophilia is regarded as morally wrong and objectionable, yet when considered according to the logic of an innocence/knowledge binary split

within the developmental discourses that define 'coming of age', the issue acquires a new complexity. Derrida's analysis of Lévi-Strauss's work on the prohibition of incest shows how deconstruction destabilises the opposition of innocence and knowledge (which operates within a broader nature/culture binary). Derrida argues that the presumed difference between nature and culture "finds itself erased or questioned" when it encounters "a scandal, that is to say, something which no longer tolerates the nature/culture opposition," and incest is something that is scandalous because it "simultaneously seems to require the predicates of nature and of culture" (Derrida, 1978, p. 283). To elaborate, Derrida (1978) writes that because the prohibition is universal then it is therefore "not dependent on any particular culture or on any determinate norm" and so can be considered natural. But as something that is prohibited, this means that it is governed by "a system of norms and interdicts" which can vary "from one social structure to another," making it also cultural (p. 283).

With regard to pedophilia, it is commonly accepted that the physical immaturity of children makes them unable to 'have sex', and as this is common to all children, their asexuality can therefore be seen as natural. But what is being suggested in this paper is that 'sex' is actually a cultural construct because it is in this domain that sexual practices are organised, regulated and made meaningful, and this includes the notion of asexuality or sexual innocence which pedophilic activity is thought to violate. So to attribute a state of asexuality to children is not the same as their being in a state of 'natural innocence' that exists independently of any particular norm or value system. The natural innocence of children is in fact culturally attributed to them, thus making pedophilia something scandalous because what makes it wrong cannot be contained by the 'inside-outside' relationship of nature to culture or innocence to knowledge. Indeed, Derrida writes that "from the moment when the incest prohibition can no longer be conceived within the nature/culture opposition, it can no longer be said to be a scandalous fact" (1978, p. 283), and neither, presumably, can pedophilia.

Instead, Derrida (1978) argues that, as something that "escapes these concepts" of nature and culture, the incest prohibition may be more accurately understood as preceding those concepts (p. 283), and the same logic can be applied to the problem of pedophilia. Derrida (1978) argues that the work of "philosophical conceptualisation" is "systematic with the nature/culture opposition," but that in order for the oppositional logic of the binary to function, it must leave "in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that makes this conceptualisation possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest" (p. 284). That the incest prohibition cannot be accommodated by the oppositional logic of nature/culture means that the latter does not come before the notion of incest by operating as founding concepts grounded in absolute, transcendental truth; rather, they are conditioned or made possible by the space that marks the difference between them. This space of difference – space that is 'undecidable' – is where "the origin of the prohibition of incest" (and of pedophilia) resides.

If Derrida's argument holds, this means that the metaphysical distinction made between youth and adult on the basis of innocence/knowledge as it applies to sexuality

cannot remain intact. This opposition cannot account for a stage that is 'becoming', a stage that is based neither in innocence nor in knowledge, or is both these things at the same time, and is therefore 'undecidable.' Despite the fact that a gradual becoming is exactly what the 'coming of age' discourse implies, in order to be able to maintain the general difference between youth and adult, an absolute break is required. We are faced with an all or nothing alternative, so there must be a shift from complete asexuality to total sexuality (from absence to presence, nature to culture, innocence to knowledge or experience, dependence to independence) and not a gradual process from one into the other. Because of this we reach the limits of 'coming of age' in that it prescribes something that is prevented from happening given the oppositional structure it is also supposed to maintain. When a moment of change, of becoming, does happen, and an obvious example of this is the loss of virginity, it is therefore seen as wrong, premature, dangerous, an "uncontrollable force" (Lesko, 2001, p. 3). A steadfast belief in the absolute innocence of children makes this loss something to fear and prevent, rather than as necessary for arrival into adulthood. As a result, pedophilia is seen to disrupt and ruin a 'natural' progression towards sexual maturity.

Concomitantly, sexual maturity is imagined as always at risk of arriving 'too soon' and thereby leading to all manner of social pathology in teenagers. As Lesko (2001) writes, "teenagers cannot go ... forward to adulthood 'before their time' without incurring derogatory labels, for example, 'immature,' 'loose,' or 'precocious'" (p. 123). But what remains unseen here is that what is at risk of being lost is only what functions as natural, not nature in itself. Derrida shows that the attribution of 'natural innocence,' by being thinkable as such, makes it always already 'cultural' (that is, governed by a variable system of norms and interdicts). 'Natural innocence' is therefore definable only in terms of its difference rather than by virtue of its presumed self-presence, and the implication of this fact is that such a 'state of being' can always be defined differently.

Such a possibility is important when considering that there is a point in current constructions of adolescence where it is physically possible, but not culturally acceptable, for young people (that is, post-pubescent) to be sexually active and to therefore have a sexual identity. It is interesting to note that the marker of cultural acceptability is age-based (turning 16 or 18 or 21), but the fact that this marker does not match the physical timing of sexual maturity does little to change both general opinion and the law that sex with a minor is utterly unacceptable. As noted above, and despite physical evidence to the contrary, such an act violates the 'natural' innocence of youth, and so it is entirely unthinkable that it be seen as anything other than a gross violation of the young person due to an extreme perversion in the adult. As Belinda Morrissey (2005) writes, "the legal dictum that one cannot consent to anything which is deemed criminal" means that "all those classed as ... minors cannot consent to any sexual act whatsoever because having sex with someone under the age of consent is criminal" (p. 60). More particularly, she notes that the implicit innocence and naïveté associated with virginity, especially for young girls, means that they cannot give informed consent (p. 59). Based on this conceptualisation of youth, there is no space in which a sexual relationship between a

minor and an adult could ever be considered not inherently abusive and criminal, and there is no other way to understand youth in this context except as victims.

Lolita therefore treads dangerous, if not impossible, territory in its depiction of a consensual sexual relationship between an adult and a minor, even though the 'safer' theme of 'innocence lost' is where the film ends. The night before their first sexual encounter, Lolita asks Humbert: "if I tell you how naughty I was at camp, promise you won't be mad?" Lolita wakes the next morning and, having slept next to Humbert, whispers her transgression in his ear. Surprised by her confession, he responds: "you played that with Charlie ... at camp?" She replies: "don't tell me you never tried it when you were a kid?" "Never," he says. She then moves and sits on top of him, removes her retainer and begins to untie his pyjama pants, saying: "I guess I'm gonna have to show you everything." As Humbert smiles up at her, his voiceover says: "Gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover." In a later scene, Lolita demonstrates her (seductive) power over Humbert by getting him to raise her allowance and to let her be in the school play. Sitting at his feet, she moves her hand up and down his inner thigh as he tries to read his mail: "I really do think it [her allowance] should be two dollars. Am I right?" she asks. Her hand moves higher, "am I right?" she repeats. Humbert, aware of what she is doing, relents: "God, yes. Two dollars."

These and many other instances in the film point to the limits of what innocence/knowledge marks as intelligible possibility by having a relationship that, when based on this distinction, is both consensual and abusive at the same time. But what Derrida's (1978) argument suggests is that it is only when the difference between nature and culture is "assumed to be self-evident" (p. 283) that the problem of teen sexuality exists. This is to say that the binary can only treat behaviour which exceeds its limits (burgeoning sexuality and/or sexual power) as problematic because the behaviour, while conditioned by the binary, threatens the coherence of the distinction and of ideas about the sexual status of young people as naturally occurring.

Here, the second element of the paradox of 'coming of age' can be introduced. The first and overall tension is that 'coming of age' describes a process that is supposed to happen given the values and structures of modern society, but is at the same time prevented from happening by those very same structures. This is because the oppositional logic of nature/culture or innocence/knowledge on which 'coming of age' is based cannot account for that which belongs to neither side of the binary. This is the second element. It has been shown how pedophilia and the problem of youth sexuality (and the representation of youth sexuality) upsets the binary distinctions that define youth. This makes the space that marks the difference between the binary positions of great significance. It is this space of difference that makes oppositional logic thinkable in the first place. This means that thinking the absolute difference between innocence and knowledge – on which judgements about pedophilia and youth sexuality are based – actually requires engaging with the space of undecidability. The effect of this engagement is to understand that what appears to be self-evident about each binary position is only ever contradictorily so because each position is grounded in a difference

from itself and not in an absolute presence with itself. The discussion now turns to an examination of responses to the screening of *Lolita* in Australia to show how both liberal and conservative perspectives on the film do not recognise this “originary difference” (Lucy, 2004, p. 88) of oppositional logic and so preserve the contradictory logic of ‘coming of age’.

‘SEE IT AND MAKE UP YOUR OWN MIND’?

The release of *Lolita* in Australia in April 1999 was met with attempts to ban it. Samela Harris writes that Adelaide MP Trish Draper, who led the protest to ban the film, called it “an encouragement to engage in predatory behaviour against young children” (1999, n.p.). She succeeded in getting the Office of Film and Literature Classification to review “the film’s R rating one day after its national release” (Schembri, 1999, n.p.). This perspective sees any depiction of pedophilia as dangerous because it would “make the behaviour acceptable” (“The case for *Lolita*,” 1999, n.p.). Mark Davidson quotes Maryam Kubasek “of the National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families” as saying that “however artistically [the new *Lolita* film] is done, it really panders to the pedophile community in the sense that what they want to believe is that children truly are sexual beings and that to initiate them in the sexual experience is doing them a favour” (1997, n.p.).

The more liberal response, on the other hand, emphasises the value of exploring the darker sides of society so that they might be better understood, but this side is clear in stating that “exposition” of such matters “is not necessarily a validation of the practice” (“The case for *Lolita*,” 1999, n.p.). “Films that deal intelligently and sensitively with unpleasant subjects deserve to be seen, not banned” writes Jim Schembri (1999, n.p.). For him, the point of “worthwhile art” is that it provides an opportunity “to look into the darker corners of human behaviour and emerge with a better understanding of ourselves” (n.p.). The point of considering these arguments, however, is not to determine which side is more convincing, or that in this instance the Classification Review Board upheld the film’s R rating (“The case for *Lolita*,” 1999, n.p.). The point is that both positions ultimately condemn pedophilia, and so evidence a failure to engage with ‘undecidability’ as it operates in moral decisions around sex abuse. For there to be such a thing as right and wrong, and to be able to make decisions based on this, requires an engagement with the space that conditions the possibility of both, and, as already noted, that space is ‘undecidable’.

Deconstructive logic suggests that if a decision is thought to have a single ‘correct’ effect or outcome, then there will have been no decision, because there will have been no space in which to recognise what a decision is: a choice between two competing options. As Derrida (1988) writes, “a decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program” that would make the decision an “effect of determinate causes” (p. 116). For there to be any possibility of coming to a decision about whether sex with a child is wrong, the question must pass through the undecidable; indeed, the very notion of decision “is structured by this experience ... of the undecidable” (Derrida, 1988, p.

116). This means that decisions are always marked by an indecision in that what seems to be the correct option is thinkable only by virtue of the irreducible possibility that that option could actually be wrong, and this possibility can never be avoided, even in the moment a decision is made. So engaging with the space of the undecidable is therefore engaging with the possibility of an outcome that is 'otherwise.'

In this instance, this means risking what seems an irresponsible choice: that pedophilia is not wrong. To be clear, though, this is not to suggest that deconstruction supports pedophilia. Deconstructing a moral absolute in this way means dealing with what it seeks to repress and this involves, as previously noted, "putting a strain on the boundaries" of a dominant way of thinking. It is perfectly okay to prohibit pedophilia, but the point is that how we come to this decision, according to Derrida (1992), involves the ghost of the undecidable (p. 24). This "ghost" silently pervades every decision, deconstructing "from within any assurance of presence" (Derrida, 1992, pp. 24-25), which means that the only way attitudes towards pedophilia will not change is if they always can change, and this possibility has to be met with at every moment. This is a difficult and sometimes a dangerous thing to do, but necessary nonetheless for what it enables us to understand about what is normally taken for granted regarding youth sexual identity.

Both sides of the argument over *Lolita* base their positions in the absolute 'wrongness' of pedophilia. Even though they argue differently about how the depiction of Lolita's relationship with Humbert should be treated, having to acknowledge the possibility of their relationship being 'otherwise' (that is, not pedophilic) is intolerable. Once again, though, within deconstruction such a belief is only ever possible based on a foundation that is 'contradictorily coherent' and, whether this basis is seen or not, a belief in the absolute wrongness of the relationship is conditioned by, is always already breached by, the opposite possibility. Without an attempt to consider what else is possible – that if constituted differently, the sexual relationship between a minor and adult might not be inherently wrong – each position can do no more than state and re-state what is thought to be unconditionally wrong about it against another position that, while arguing for a different solution, is doing so for the same reason. With minds already made up, each position prevents the other from making any progress towards getting what they want and so perpetuates debate over something that both sides would wish to have resolved.

A deconstructive intervention is also required for making sense of the film's external context of production, as it is through this context that the content of *Lolita* is ultimately framed. Barbara Biggs, as a survivor of, and a public speaker on, sexual abuse, writes that if a film like *Lolita* is going to truly deal with something like pedophilia then it should cast someone in the lead who is actually 12 years old, as the character is portrayed in the original novel (2005, n.p.). In her opinion, the 1962 film cast an actress (Sue Lyon) who "looks at least 18," and while the 1997 version cast a 14-year-old (Dominique Swain) in the role, it made "at least some attempt to make her behaviour and body mannerisms those of a young girl" (2005, n.p.). The point of her argument,

however, is that “the obvious reason a real 12-year-old wasn’t used, or someone who looked 12, is that audiences would have been horrified” (Biggs, 2005, n.p.) making them less willing to enter into the film’s world and the story being told because it would simply be too real. “Heaven forbid” she writes, that “viewers would not be able to avoid the thought of something similar happening to their own daughters” (2005, n.p.).

This is an interesting position because it highlights the fact that there comes a point in debate over the film’s content where ‘real life’ intervenes and acts against the risk of the ‘otherwise’ being felt. According to this logic, working once again to the reassuring, yet impossible, certitude of the innocence/knowledge distinction, it would be exploitative and abusive to cast an actual 12-year-old in the role of Lolita. Even though the attention to the film’s subject matter has been given on account of its closeness to a real life issue, and the film’s potential effects on real life have been the cause for much controversy, any question of the film’s relationship to real life is undermined by the legalities and moral ambiguities of having a minor portray the role in such a manner as would be necessary to achieve verisimilitude. In other words, to attempt realism here is to actually push beyond the limits of intelligible reality.

What is even more interesting, however, is the claim that the role of Lolita could only have been played by a girl at or near that age. Harris quotes Jeremy Irons, the Humbert Humbert of the 1997 film, on finding Swain to play Lolita, saying “we were lucky to catch her at that age” (1999, n.p.). Another girl, he says, “was the right age but had been in a lot of Hollywood soaps” and so had “screen reactions” that were “like a mini-adult.” In contrast, the unknown Swain was “a fawn-like creature who was not pretty and yet because of her youth and lack of self-consciousness she was terribly attractive and also infuriating, all the things Lolita should be” (quoted in Harris, 1999, n.p.). Irons’ comments point to a brief period where age (14 years) permitted use, but where body and personality were still that of a young girl. By the end of filming, however, Irons says that the stage had passed: “in just that six months, she had grown about 15cm for a start” (quoted in Harris, 1999, n.p.). This suggests that, while the casting of a 14-year-old required many precautionary measures, such as having “all scenes ... carefully videoed as well as filmed, [having] the young star’s mother on the set at all times and [using] an older body-double ... for all scenes of sexual implication” (Harris, 1999, n.p.), no one else could have captured the essence of the character. Swain’s unselfconsciousness made her ideal to play Lolita, Irons suggesting that such a quality could not be replicated by a more experienced actress, and that once that sense was lost, there was no getting it back. Placing this within a nature/culture (innocence/knowledge) opposition, it is Swain’s ‘natural innocence’ that makes her ideal for the role but also vulnerable to the dangers of premature exposure to sex.

Nevertheless, it might be argued that rather than this exposure leading to her being a victim, it is her perceived innocence that would make her less likely to be harmed simply by being, as traditional logic would have it, unaware of the culturally constructed taboo she is involved with. It would be Swain’s eventual self-consciousness, and the knowing that comes with that, that would make her aware of the potential dangers

involved and therefore at a greater risk of being harmed by the experience. What is being suggested here is that whether young people are aware of themselves in terms of their sexuality or not, dominant logic maintains that only youth can depict youth, but to have youth depict youth is to violate what is intrinsic about youth. This is to say that only youth in their perceived natural state of being (that is, in a state of 'becoming') can offer a depiction of that natural state, but the deliberate enactment of that state (on or in film, or in photographic work such as Henson's) contradicts the assumption that it is a state of innocent unknowing, the effect of which is to 'unnaturally' remove them from that state.

Here the third element to the 'coming of age' paradox is added. The first element is that 'coming of age' prescribes a process that is supposed to happen, but because the discourse is grounded in the oppositional distinction of innocence and knowledge, in order to be maintained, the binary cannot account for how youths gradually become adult. This means that 'coming of age' is not able to occur in the way that it is thought it should. The second element is that failing to account for the 'undecidable' element that conditions this conceptual opposition means that it is not possible to know the difference between such elements and to therefore be able to operate within them in the first place. The third element is that for the distinctions that the space of undecidability marks to exist, they have to remain open to the possibility of being 'otherwise'. This means that youth are not necessarily victims if they have a sexual relationship with an adult, it is not necessarily absolutely wrong, and it is not necessarily a violation of what is intrinsic about youth. Moral decisions are made nonetheless, and they have real effects, but by removing the fixity of notions of youth and abuse, we can engage differently with the "field ... of decidability" (Derrida, 1988, p. 116) and therefore with possibilities that take us beyond current conceptual limits.

***THIRTEEN: 'THEY'RE NOT LITTLE GIRLS ANYMORE'*⁸**

Thirteen (2003) provides another opportunity to think differently about youth and the discourse of 'coming of age'. Directed by Catherine Hardwicke, it depicts life at the extreme end of what might be called teenage rebellion, even though the film ultimately offers viewers a return to 'safer' conceptual territory, as with *Lolita*. It nonetheless challenges the limits of possibility regarding youth behaviour and in doing so encounters the paradox of 'coming of age,' pointing to its fourth key constitutive element. *Thirteen* is the story of Tracy who, upon entering the seventh grade and meeting the popular Evie, goes from being a typical good girl to a typical bad one under Evie's influence. The two girls share a wild and intense relationship in which they, amongst other things, steal money, shoplift, get various body piercings, take drugs, and have casual sex. Tracy's family struggles to understand and cope with her increasingly erratic behaviour, which eventually culminates in a dramatic showdown between the girls and their mothers. It would be easy to say that the film represents behaviours and experiences that are in fact uncommon to most seventh graders, and so does not need to be seen as a grave indication of the troubled lives of young people in the 'real world'. But what this film demonstrates is precisely the hold that the dominant 'coming of age' logic has over our

thinking, such that the logic is affirmed even as it is challenged.

The film marks a developmental stage that is 'in between' child and adult, or 'in transition' to adulthood, and, while this stage is upsetting and troublesome, it is possible to see that it is part of the normative 'coming of age' process. When developmental logic conceives of a gradual process of preparation for adulthood, then it must prescribe that teens go through various obstacles in the service of their eventual arrival at adulthood. But also, the development of an adult identity calls for a period that is inherently tumultuous and disruptive due to its occupation of a social space that is neither child nor adult. Being a 'tween'⁹ is going to upset the boundaries of social acceptability, but that is what is supposed to happen given this logic. In Christine Griffin's (2004) words, "dominant representations of youth have simultaneously treated youth as a period of inevitable turmoil and a time for 'having a fling', and as a time when the path to 'normal' life must be found and followed" (p. 16). So however confronting its depiction, and however destructive the stage might be, teen rebellion has a place in the 'coming of age' discourse, to the extent that it is thought 'wrong' not to go through a 'rebellious phase'. Why, then, is it the cause for so much fear when this is exactly how 'coming of age' has been structured?

If rebellion is accepted because it ultimately leads to an acceptance of the dominant social order, then this would by definition not make it rebellious. 'True' rebellion takes us towards the 'otherwise' of conceptual thought; it is about engaging with the undecidability of 'coming of age' and of opening up to an unforeseeable outcome. As already noted, a space that is 'in between' is actually an unthinkable space given binary logic. If youth is about being in preparation for an adult state of being, then in order to maintain this ideal, young people can never actually arrive at adulthood, they can never become adult, for this would upset the defining limits of both 'youth' and 'adult'. Teens therefore rebel in the service of nothing. Here, at this conceptual limit, there is an additional aspect of the third part of the paradox of 'coming of age.' For something to count as an event or a marker of 'coming of age', it cannot be seen as a consequence of any predetermined knowledge or planned outcome, otherwise there is no 'otherwise' and "it would become a foregone conclusion," already "right in advance" (Lucy, 2004, p. 150). No moment of transition could therefore be marked: there could only be "the unfolding of a calculable process" (Derrida, 1992, p. 24). By contrast, Derrida (2002) argues that "to whom it is said 'come', should not be determined in advance" (p. 12), for to do so would be to cancel out the context in which to experience such a thing as, in this instance, 'coming of age'. So for teen rebellion to count towards the event of 'coming of age', an "interruption of the deliberation that precedes it" is required (Derrida, 1992, p. 26).

This involves working with and not against undecidability in making 'all or nothing' distinctions between youth and adult. This means that teens are either yet to have 'come of age' – are yet to have 'done' the things that supposedly mark 'coming of age' – or 'coming of age' will have "already followed a rule" (Derrida, 1992, p. 24) and occurred. The moments of 'arrival' in the film, such as when Tracy has her first

sexual encounter or gets high for the first time, are finite moments, except that once they happen, “once the ordeal of the undecidable is past (if that is possible)” (Derrida, 1992, p. 24), they cannot be traced back to an origin grounded in Tracy’s ‘youth’.

In other words, the moment of a transition necessitates a break with what Derrida (1992) calls a “horizon of expectation” (p. 26). “If there were anticipation or programming”, Derrida (2002) argues, “there would be neither event nor history” (p. 12), because “it is on condition of the ‘come’ that there is an experience of coming, of the event ... and consequently, of that which, because it comes from the other, cannot be anticipated” (p. 12). This would make teen rebellion, rather than a prescribed developmental stage, a point at which the ‘otherwise’ is engaged. It would be a point where the ‘event’ or ‘events’ of ‘coming of age’ occur, and so rebellion is what institutes a new conceptual order that breaks with what preceded it. So to say that adulthood has been successfully prepared for is not the same as having it arrive from youth, for the preparation done ‘in’ youth anticipated an outcome, but the only way that an outcome could come to pass is if its arrival was not the expected outcome. This is because youth is adulthood’s ‘other’ and, following Derrida’s (1992) remarks, we cannot do without this conceptual distinction, even as it is challenged (p. 23). So the outcome is not the outcome, it is something entirely ‘new’ because Tracy, for example, will have become something else: adult.

This is the fourth element of the paradox of ‘coming of age’. Once ‘coming of age’ has ‘arrived’ or ‘occurred’, having passed through the space of the undecidable, it will immediately become something else and it will no longer be governed by the horizon of expectation of ‘coming of age’. This is to say that youth does not, cannot, ‘come of age’. Yet this is also how adulthood can come. While this manner of conceptualisation appears to be contradictory, it is a way of allowing a process of ‘coming of age’ to occur in a way that keeps a youth/adult or innocence/knowledge binary intact.

However, the social context of the production of *Thirteen* signals the difficulty of dealing with this last element (and therefore all the elements) of the paradox of ‘coming of age’. As with *Lolita*, the young actors in the film had to abide by strict guidelines during the filming process. For example, the film’s DVD audio commentary explains that in a three-way make-out scene with Tracy, Evie and neighbour Luke, the guidelines of the manner and kind of touching allowed had to be strictly observed by parents and other officials during filming (for example, the girls could not touch the waistband of the boy’s shorts). The director, Hardwicke, also notes that in the scene Evie had to be stopped from using a bong taken from Luke’s mantelpiece because Nikki Reed, the actress playing Evie, was underage. Instead, they had her put it down and rejoin the threesome by having Luke say “get back here, girl.” She sits back down and pulls off his shirt – the less controversial option, it would seem.

Also, while the film was admired for its highly realistic portrayal of ‘real’ teen life, which includes “sex, violence, drug use, profanity” and very near “nudity”, Catherine Driscoll writes that these are exactly the issues that get “assessed in considering whether a film is suitable for youth” and are what count towards a restrictive rating (2002, p.

206). In this case, the film was classified MA+ in Australia and R in America. It seems ridiculous that minors would ever be allowed to portray these things, however closely regulated and supervised, if by doing so they would involve themselves in things deemed unsuitable for youth to see, let alone do, and even if they are supposedly depicting what teen reality is really about. What does it mean for the discourse of 'coming of age' that the young actresses be allowed in the film when it is illegal for actual thirteen-year-olds to see it? We run into the same conceptual contradiction raised by *Lolita*: that only youth can depict youth, but to have youth depict youth is to violate what is intrinsic about youth.

The result is that *Thirteen* is a film "about youth but not for youth" (Driscoll, 2002, p. 206). Adults can watch the on-screen transgressions of young teens, yet they can still protect the innocence of young viewers through, in this instance, film classification guidelines. This, however, does not open the way for dealing with the issue that youth are simultaneously regarded as innocent at the same time as their non-innocence is displayed, even if it is only 'performed' as opposed to actually 'experienced'. But, significantly, this is assuming that there is a difference between the two.

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Both films actually provide a key clue for how to address the conflicts that the paradox of 'coming of age' produces. The kind of behaviour depicted in the films becomes a reason to reaffirm the distinction of innocence/knowledge, because every time something happens to mark 'coming of age', the notion of innocence that defines youth is broken with. Because this contradicts the notion of 'coming of age' as progressive and gradual, such a break seems dangerous and premature, a cause for fear and panic, even though a young person is doing what they are supposed to do in the only way that the binary logic of innocence/knowledge will allow if that logic is to be maintained.

However, for innocence to be represented at all it must already be other than so-called pure innocence. One of the issues raised here (and by the Henson case) is that to have young people 'perform' their age is to violate their own innocence, which assumes that innocence cannot be performed, that it can only 'be', which is why only youth can depict youth, even though, technically, it cannot be depicted. But the deconstructive reading performed here suggests that the films are not strictly a reflection or representation of a 'natural' state of youth if that so-called natural state is already constituted within a system of differential relations, or is already 'breached' or 'split' from within. This is to say that the experience of innocence is made possible precisely because it is not pure, but produced. A 'produced' innocence need not be thought of as less important or 'true' than an absolute innocence, but the former calls for more attention and consideration to be paid to how we make sense of youth and the effects of this process, and there is an opportunity to think differently as a result.

What is revealed by calling attention to the manner of conceptualisation of youth in this way is that part of what constitutes pedophilia and teen rebellion as problematic has to do with the concepts in use. By acknowledging the ambivalence of the grounding

assumptions of 'coming of age,' the issues of safety, abuse, consent and exploitation that are raised by these problems can be considered beyond assumptions of the inherent nature of youth. This does not mean that youth has no firm meaning or will slip from any attempt to make it meaningful, nor is this analysis about replacing a flawed logic with something less problematic. This work involves, as Derrida (1976) states, both "conserving and annulling inherited conceptual oppositions" (p.105). In doing so, it is possible to respond to the perceived threat posed by media representations of sex and sexuality in relation to young people in a way that does not reproduce the conditions that produced the threat in the first place.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to address concerns about the representation of youth sexuality in the media by focusing on the conceptual conditions of youth that work to structure a notion of youth sexuality as problematic. Using techniques of Derridean deconstruction, the paper examined the conceptual limits of the discourse of 'coming of age', articulated four key paradoxical elements that underpin the discourse, and investigated the effects of these elements through an analysis of the films *Lolita* and *Thirteen*. The reading revealed that the oppositional logic of nature / culture or innocence / knowledge cannot contain that which it marks as the proper development of youth and their ideal entry into adulthood. It showed that when the undecidability of oppositional logic goes unrecognised, dominant logic becomes problematic because attempts are made to maintain a logic based on absolute distinctions, when in fact they are thinkable only because they are not absolute. The effect of this is that the discourse of 'coming of age' can only perpetuate a conflict between a desire to protect the innocence of youth and a demand that they 'grow up'.

In response to this conflict, this paper has argued that the innocence of youth is always already cultural, and that there is nothing intrinsic or immutable about youth to work from or to seek to protect. From this perspective, there is an opportunity to think differently about youth and to have arguments about the problems of teen sexuality progress rather than be continuously re-hashed using terms that ensure the perpetuation of youth sexuality as a problem.

Further research might therefore consider the meaning and effects of expressions of youth sexuality in the media according to constructions of youth that do not take youth to be victims, or inherently vulnerable, or innocent and asexual. The kinds of outcomes such alternative constructions or discourses produce for young people and the wider society would also need to be investigated and this may require the application of empirical research methods which have not been considered here. However, if, as the present deconstructive study has indicated, the barrier to moving beyond the problem of youth sexuality has to do with how the conceptual frameworks underpinning dominant youth discourses operate, then any further attempt to address the problem of youth sexuality and consider solutions for it would need to involve examining the assumptions about youth underpinning the chosen research method or interpretive framework, as

well as how such assumptions relate to the problem or issue under examination.

ENDNOTES

1. I acknowledge and thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive feedback on this paper. I also thank Sue Yell, Simon Cooper and Robert Briggs for their assistance in the development of the arguments presented here, and for providing comments and feedback on the paper.
2. See David Buckingham's *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (2000) and *Young People, Sex and the Media: The Facts of Life?* (2003) for useful examinations of popular perceptions of youth and concerns about the adverse influence of media on young people that can be seen to rely on assumptions about the nature of youth provided by developmental psychology.
3. The 2006 paper from the Australia Institute on "corporate pedophilia" argued that retailers such as David Jones and Myer engaged in a form of child abuse by using sexualised images of children in their advertising campaigns (see <http://www.tai.org.au/documents/downloads/DP90.pdf>).
4. While it is generally assumed that 'coming of age' concerns teenagers or at least concerns youth once they reach puberty, it is also the case that children are never not learning how to behave in society. However, it may be said that unlike the category 'youth', 'childhood' does not carry the same expectation as youth to 'become' adult; rather, children are required to just 'be'. But given that the activities of childhood eventually become subject to a specific set of expectations that characterise youth, it is also possible to suggest that all so-called children are engaged in a process of 'coming of age'. I do not therefore draw a sharp distinction between child and youth, although I predominantly use the terms youth or teenager here as the films I will shortly discuss concern girls aged 12 and 13.
5. The deconstructive approach which informs the argument of this paper is derived from Derrida, however Derrida's work is part of a larger theoretical tradition of interrogating and questioning the assumptions that have underpinned Western culture. Key theorists such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Lacan have made significant contributions to this tradition, and Derrida's approach has been informed by aspects of their work.
6. The phrase 'An unthinkable attraction', used here as a subheading, is a tagline from the 1997 film version of *Lolita*.
7. This subheading is another tagline from *Lolita* (1997).
8. The phrase 'They're not little girls anymore' is a tagline from *Thirteen* (2003).
9. The term 'tween' refers to middle childhood and signals a state or stage of being that is, literally, in between child and teen. The term is predominantly used within a marketing discourse to describe the consumer category of 8-14 year olds and has been discussed in the context of accusations of corporate pedophilia.

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