



“Je suis fatigué par le culte de la jeunesse”:

Or, Walking on Ice in High Heels

—Mavis Reimer, Catherine Tosenberger, and Larissa Wodtke

In its December 2010–January 2011 issue, under the banner “*Cadeaux*,” *Vogue Paris* ran a glittering forty-page photo spread displaying a profusion of extravagant branded gifts that its readers were encouraged to give—or, more likely, to ask to receive—for the coming holiday celebrations: Fendi shoes, Chanel purses, Dior picture frames, Cartier diamond earrings, Jimmy Choo sandals, an emerald necklace by Harry Winston, a gold lamé dress from Balmain. In many ways, the spread was like the pages of advertisements that front every fashion magazine. The difference in the *Vogue* section was that it was anchored by a series of photographs featuring very young female models—some of them reportedly as young as six—wearing the dresses and shoes and jewellery being marketed. Directed by stylist Mélanie Huynh and photographed by Sharif Hamza, the girls were pictured lounging on beds, supine on couches, looking into mirrors and over their shoulders at the

camera, and sprawling among the presents at the foot of a Christmas tree. Given the title and the evocation of the season in the spread, the implication seemed to be clear: these girls were also being staged as *cadeaux* for the adult readers of the magazine.

A storm of controversy on the Internet followed the publication of the issue, with many bloggers protesting the appearance of the girls in the images as exploitation. On the blog *Boing Boing*, for example, under the heading “Pedocouture,” Xeni Jardin reported that “[t]he December issue of French *Vogue*, edited by Tom Ford, features an extensive spread of child models presented more or less like whores.” Commenting on a *Lovelyish* blog post with the title “Paris *Vogue*’s Kiddie Editorial is a Pedobear Macro Waiting to Happen,” wideopenskies was equally unambiguous about her or his response: “This is disgusting. Children are meant to be happy and smiling. Look at those faces . . . like seasoned models being coerced into demonstrating



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a somber expression for a photograph.” A post from elizabeth on the blog *Frockwriter* was more explicit as she responded to a previous comment suggesting that the girls could be read as playing dress-up: “this is NOT little girls playing dress up! it’s marketing luxury clothes with baby girls dressed like prostitutes, posed in porn come-hither situations . . . as if they were tiny sex toys. revolting! shame on you Vogue!” On the same blog, a writer identifying herself as A Mother extended these observations: “If any of these looks, coupled with that clothing/makeup, were from a grown woman in a nightclub, the message would be pretty clear. You cannot just separate that kind of body language from the usual meaning just because the body performing it is a child.” Another contributor to *Lovelyish*, using the pseudonym riot_as_rain, admitted that “sure the pictures are pretty, say waht [sic] you will,” but concluded that “the subjects are **children**. they aren’t meant to be ‘captured’ this way. . . . this is so wrong.” Like riot_as_rain, Cassandra on the blog *The Fashionist* admitted to some ambivalence about the pictures, but found her own ambivalence disturbing:

I’m so confused at this. These are incredibly beautiful girls, but they’re GIIIRLLLLSS!!! I have to keep reminding myself that when I look at these photos. I’m floored. I like it, but it’s like I’m not supposed to like it. The girls look incredibly beautiful, and these are excellent photographs, artistically speaking, but WHY DO THEY HAVE TO LOOK SO MUCH OLDER? That’s what really bothers me.

It is exactly the confusion of “proper” child and adult roles that

makes the images obscene, according to a writer who identified as Balanceanddiscernment on *Frockwriter*: “The reason it looks so obscene is that pretending a child is an adult is unnatural and unethical. It immorally puts the child in a place that they do not belong, can not [sic] benefit from and will find grave harm in.” On 17 December 2010, just weeks after the release of the holiday issue, editor Carine Roitfeld announced her departure from the position of *Rédactrice en chef* of the magazine, effective at the end of January 2011. Rumours that she had been fired spread quickly, although no official confirmation or denial from Condé Nast Publications was forthcoming.

From the time she assumed the position of chief editor in 2001, Roitfeld’s career at *Vogue Paris* was punctuated by scandals about images she published: a model tied up with curtain cord in what Roitfeld called a scene of “glamour bondage,” an apparently pregnant model smoking, a pale-skinned blonde model “blacked up,” a fur-clad model walking defiantly past an anti-fur protest, a former anorexic, now plus-size model swallowing a whole squid. In an interview with *The New York Times* on the ninetieth anniversary of the magazine in 2010, Roitfeld observed that “it is the job of fashion magazines to continue to push boundaries and provoke, even in the face of attacks on their judgment” and complained that fashion journalists have less freedom now than they did twenty years ago to “talk about things politically”: “You cannot smoke,

you cannot show [military] arms, you cannot show little girls, because everyone now is very anxious not to have problems with the law. Everything we do now is like walking in high heels on the ice, but we keep trying to do it” (Wilson). In the case of plus-size model Crystal Renn—who, according to fashion journalist Eric Wilson, “has become a vocal advocate for incorporating different sizes in fashion magazines”—it is possible to imagine that an image of her voracious appetite might readily be understood as an ironic commentary on the problematic relationships of many contemporary women to food. “Blacking up” a pale European model could be read as a refusal to take race as a meaningful category of description. In what sense, though, could the “*Cadeaux*” spread be seen as “political,” and why was it this set of images that seems to have been deemed indefensible in the face of attacks on the editors’ judgment?

After all, while the “*Cadeaux*” spread garnered the most attention, it was not the only challenge to the norms of the fashion industry within the magazine. The holiday issue was guest-edited by American fashion designer and film director Tom Ford, who photographed two other spreads that pushed the envelope of “good taste.” One, entitled “Forever Love,” appeared in the centre of the issue and featured two elderly models in a series of passionate, overtly sexual embraces, unabashedly displaying grey hair and wrinkled skin along with the *haute* jewellery on

show in the spread. In the commentary accompanying the photographs, Ford announced, “*Je suis fatigué par le culte de la jeunesse.*” While the bodies in “Forever Love” clearly are not normative in terms of the aesthetics of the fashion industry, the heterosexual couple that Ford imagines as “*depuis longtemps, fidèles l’un à l’autre et toujours incandescents de désir*” also points to many ideals and values hegemonic in Western culture. The second spread, which appears toward the back of the issue, is more obviously shocking. “*La panthère ose*” is loosely organized as the narrative of a middle-aged woman recovering from cosmetic surgery. Face and body stitched and bandaged, she nevertheless enjoys the tender care and ardent erotic attention of two young men at the same time as she is arranged to show off to fullest advantage the commodities she is being used to sell. (Not surprisingly, given that the central character is a middle-aged “cougar,” animal prints are a recurrent feature of many of those commodities.) Arguably, then, the December 2010–January 2011 *Vogue Paris* issue as a whole can be read as satirizing the narrow strictures of beauty and desirability current in the fashion industry and as revealing the artifice of those constructions and the work—indeed, the pain—required to maintain them. In this context, the opening “*Cadeaux*” spread might be understood as invoking “*le culte de la jeunesse*” in order to explore and to explode it.

For the most part, the Internet commentary on “*Cadeaux*” seems to have been fuelled by decontextualized images from the *Vogue* issue, but a few bloggers advanced the opinion that the opening spread would be better read within the larger context in which it appears in this issue. In a post for *MYDaily UK*, for example, Libby Banks reminds her audience of the fashion spreads that follow “*Cadeaux*”:

[A]s easy as it is to simply see these preteen photos as distasteful, it is important to view them in context of the magazine issue: it shows an unflinching snapshot of the fashion industry’s misdemeanours and taboos. . . . Ford has created a dialogue about the fashion industry’s attitude to age; in an industry where teenage models are encouraged to have the physique of a small child in order to promote women’s clothing, surely the next “logical” step is to use a small child to model grownup fashion.

Jenna Sauers, a former model writing in the feminist blog *Jezebel*, reaches the conclusion that the spread is “a parody and a critique of the fashion industry’s unhealthy interest in young girls, not an endorsement or a glamourization of it” by paying attention to the obvious “over-the-top styling and the overall lurid quality.” Like Libby Banks, Sauers suggests that the “*Cadeaux*” spread asks to be read satirically in the context of the material and symbolic conditions of

the contemporary fashion industry, which prefers teenage models and the straight up-and-down female bodies that characterize the current “ideal” to which adult women are to “aspire”¹: “One of the most uncomfortable truths about the fashion industry is that most models begin working when they are in their early teens or even tweens; they are children.” The *Vogue* spread takes the obsession with youth to its logical conclusion, she suggests, highlighting the hypocrisy of an industry that happily uses teenage girls (who, as a modelling agent quoted by Sauers remarks approvingly, are “much, much easier to groom”) and the hypocrisy of a reading public that refuses to concern itself with these girls’ working conditions: “fashion fills its magazine editorials, runway shows, and ad campaigns with teenagers whom it styles to impersonate adults” and “[c]onsumers largely take these images at face value,” that is, agree to pretend that the girls are adults. The “*Cadeaux*” spread, however, refuses to allow this pretence:

But when an editorial like this comes out? When a stylist—Melanie Huynh—and a photographer—Sharif Hamza—somehow get it in their minds to viciously satirize an industry that so fetishizes youth that it pretends adolescents are preferable substitutes for grown women? And when a respected fashion magazine—*Vogue Paris*—has the balls to publish their horrifying *Toddlers in*

Tiaras-on-speed work? When that happens, cue the outrage! *Won’t someone think of the children.* Maybe not of these children in particular—identified only as Lea, Prune, and Thylane—or of the children who fill magazine pages *everywhere*, but, you know, of the children in general. (Sauers)

In one of the posts commenting on Sauers’s article, a reader references James R. Kincaid’s *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. It is hard to imagine a better illustration of Kincaid’s argument than the “*Cadeaux*” spread: the photographs, and the outraged reaction they were surely intended to provoke, confront us with the fact that “[o]ur culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing. . . . We allow so much power to the child’s sexual appeal that we no longer question whether adults are drawn to children” (13). The dresses worn by the models in the “*Cadeaux*” spread are not particularly revealing and the poses of the young girls are standard in fashion spreads. The scandal of the photographs, then, does not reside in anything that can be *seen* so much as in the fact that they deny us what Kincaid calls the expected, comfortable forms through which we simultaneously enjoy and disavow the “irrepressible allure of children”: the fantasy of innocence, of naturalness, of children’s unselfconscious delight in their bodies. The outrageously expensive

and formal clothing featured in the “*Cadeaux*” spread, the bright makeup that does not pretend to a “natural” look, the upswept hair, the heavy bangles and earrings and necklaces, and the direct gazes of the models toward the camera insist on the artifice of these children’s beauty and so expose the artifice of our constructions of children. We desire children because we have decided that they are “sweet, innocent, vacant, smooth-skinned, spontaneous, and mischievous” (Kincaid 14), but here they are dressed in adult clothes, posed in elaborately decorated rooms, expertly performing the codes of teen/adult normative femininity, lacking everything that we find enticing about children (except, perhaps, smooth skin). We are appalled. Two of the most common descriptors of children in the bloggers’ comments are “natural” and “free.” Children should be natural and children should be free of all the toxic social conditioning with which adults struggle. This position is neatly summarized by Holly in her comment on the blog *Huda Beauty*: “Children should know that they are gorgeous without all the makeup. They have plenty of time to grow up. Don’t get me wrong. I LOVE to wear makeup and feel beautiful, but children should let their natural beauty shine while they still can.”

Holly’s comment also reveals another assumption common to many of these posts: sexual commodification is the normal destination of female subjects in consumer society. In 1990, in her

groundbreaking study *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler proposed that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). At the time, the proposition that there were no natural, prediscursive categories of sex that grounded gender performances was difficult for many readers to grasp, much less to concede. In 2011, the blog discussions of the “*Cadeaux*” spread make it clear that readers of fashion magazines in general take great pleasure in observing the repeated stylizations of the body and in contemplating the sorts of gendered beings that can emerge from this performative play. The notion that such repetitions are always unstable and fail to repeat exactly is not a source of anxiety so much as a promise of ongoing pleasure. At the same time, however, it seems that children—perhaps particularly young female children—continue to be needed to hold in place the availability of other, idealized ways of being. In these discussions, in other words, children as a category confirm that commodified adult female subject positions *are* performances. The distress caused by the photo spread, then, may not be so much a response to the fact that little girls are mimicking sexualized adult roles as that they are playing these roles too successfully. As A Mother explains, “Yes kids play dressup. Innocent dressup is full of mismatched odds and ends, smeared makeup, plastic shoes,



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giggles and silliness. It is a pretend parody of the adult experience devoid of the adult understandings." The real scandal, it seems, may be that (adult) understanding is not needed to produce the subject, that the congealed effects of play and performance are produced within regulatory frames that exceed the individual's understanding or control. The fear is not that these girls will recapitulate the movement into commodified adult female sexuality—there appears to be little doubt that they will—but that contemporary childhood itself is an effect of commodity culture, that there is no outside to the system in which we are all enmeshed. As Sauers astutely notes, the "outrage" has to do with "children in general" and not with these particular young people.

In this regard, it is worthwhile to consider the calendar inserted into this year-end issue of *Vogue Paris*. The 2011 calendar features twelve images of a female model posed in the manner of traditional pornographic centrefolds and nude calendars. In contrast to the girls in the "Cadeaux" spread, in the majority of these photographs the model's breasts and genitals, sometimes clad in lingerie and sometimes nude, are visible. The calendar seems at first glance an odd insertion into a magazine whose readership consists primarily of women, with a notable minority of gay men (such as guest editor Ford). Presumably, a feature that references the interpretive codes of pornography aimed at heterosexual men is not going to be used as pornography by the majority of its audience. It is important to note, however, that the calendar, with its lush set design, wildly expensive jewellery and lingerie, and its romantic rather than lewd positioning of the model, is more evocative of middlebrow pornographic publications such as *Playboy* (which, like *Vogue*, promotes

itself as an aspirational lifestyle magazine²) than of determinedly lowbrow publications such as *Hustler*. In “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust,” Laura Kipnis argues that the majority of mainstream contemporary pornography is ferociously class-conscious and aims to puncture the artsy pretensions and bourgeois mores of publications such as *Vogue* and *Playboy*. The calendar insert, then, plays with cultural disgust by invoking a genre that is often oppositional to the *haute* bourgeois lifestyle promoted by the magazine. Kipnis’s argument that “[o]ne of pornography’s large themes is that we’re adults who were once children, in whom the social has been instilled at great and often tragic cost” (“How to Look” 122) seems very much to the point. Coming in the same issue as the opening “*Cadeaux*” spread, the calendar could be read as posing the question of whether the “little girl lost” narrative is preferable to the possibility that there is no “once” for adults to contemplate, no access to a state of mind prior to the entry into the systems of exchange through which we are produced.

The articles in this issue of *Jeunesse* explore the unstable, shifting, and interwoven codes of “the child,” subjectivity, sexuality, performance, and identity circulating in different times and places. Derritt Mason takes as his focus the 1755 London trial of Charles Bradbury for sodomy, asking whether contemporary cultural critics can find evidence in the historical records of the transgressive, homosexual

desires of the young apprentice James Hearne, who appears in court only as Bradbury’s victim. Tanis MacDonald argues that the recent Canadian cult film *Ginger Snaps* marks a change in the iconography of horror films, in that the suburban adolescent girl at the centre of the film manifests her lesbian and incestuous desire for her sister in her transformation into a werewolf, a monstrous form usually assumed only by male protagonists in the genre. Naomi Lesley observes that adolescence has been constructed as a period of identity crisis since the beginning of the twentieth century and the publication of G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence*, although the understanding of what constitutes crisis has shifted over the past century, as evidenced in texts from the beginning of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Geneviève Falaise and Monique Noël-Gaudreault demonstrate that Charlotte Gingras, in her recent novel *Ophélie* (a novel translated into English as *Pieces of Me*), seeks to counter the stereotype that the girl or woman who loves is brought into being only through the gaze of her (male) lover, and to explore the part that Ophélie plays in constructing herself through her drawings of girls. In reading artist Diana Thorneycroft’s return to the use of dolls in her photographs throughout her career, Peter Hodgins considers how these simulacra of children enable Thorneycroft to analyze and to satirize Canadian culture, and most recently, to testify to the traumas of Canadian history.

As in most issues, the review essays here cover a range of topics. Notably, several of them—by Clare Bradford, Margaret Mackey, and Richard Flynn—focus on major scholarly publications in the field of young people’s texts. Taken together, the number and the breadth of such publications in the past decade speak to the consolidation of the field as a significant scholarly site of inquiry with its own histories, methods, and trajectories. One of those trajectories is the growing understanding of the need for the study of texts for young people—which are so often used to construct national subjects—to be set within international and transnational contexts. The reviews of Canadian texts for young people by Japanese scholar Sumiko Shirai and Swedish scholar Björn Sundmark highlight the value of such analysis across political boundaries: as they

demonstrate, there are ways of thinking about animals and “the North” that have been naturalized in Canada but are not universally shared.

The controversy over the use of young girls as models in *Vogue Paris* was also inflected by geographic location. While bloggers worldwide wrote about the issue, discussants on *Boing Boing* agreed that it was particularly American, Canadian, and Scandinavian writers who judged the pictures to be sexualized (and possibly pornographic) images rather than beautiful images. Clearly, “the child” is a figure that is constructed differently, not only at different times but also in different places. One of the opportunities offered by transnational conversations is that we can use such incommensurabilities to unravel the work of “the child” as an identity category in culture.

Notes

¹ Frauke Franckenstein has argued that “in contemporary Western ideals of beauty we find an aesthetic idealization of the female adolescent’s body, which means the non-adult and the non-maternal body, as well as the aesthetic idealization of the boy’s body in the female body” (9).

² Agnès Rocamora has argued that the letters page of *Vogue Paris* “participates in the production of the belief in fashion as a high art and the construction of *Vogue* as a magazine devoted to the field of high culture” (154).

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