Australia’s Bill Henson scandal: notes on the new cultural attitude to images

MELINDA HINKSON

In May 2008 police removed a series of artworks by internationally renowned photomedia artist Bill Henson from the walls of a Sydney gallery just hours before his exhibition was due to open. They did so in response to an allegation that the invitation to the opening carried an image of child pornography. This article explores some of the events and public debate that followed. The author suggests that rather than simply replicating an age-old debate over censorship, the recent furore in Australia reveals dimensions of a new cultural attitude to images. She sketches some of the key dimensions of this attitude, with a particular focus on the increasingly dominant visual experiences offered by digitally mediated images. Following scholars writing at the interface between art theory and anthropology, she argues that these experiences configure relationships between persons and images in particular ways. She argues, too, that our mediated engagements with fleeting digital images are influencing the way we apprehend other kinds of pictures, and in turn have implications for our relations with each other. In conclusion she suggests that the Henson case highlights the ethical implications of recognising the qualitative distinctiveness of different kinds of visual experience.

Photographs lose themselves in the ordinary world they help to construct. (Burgin 2003, 130)

One kind of corrective to dogma is looking itself, pursued long enough. (Clark 2006, 12)

A visual culture storm erupted in Australia in 2008. In May police seized a number of works by internationally renowned photomedia artist Bill Henson from Sydney’s Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. The dramatic raid, just hours before the show was scheduled to open, followed a series of complaints made to police by members of the public via talkback radio, and by a prominent anti-child-abuse campaigner, who suggested the invitation to the exhibition opening contained an image of child pornography. The invitation had circulated on the Internet as well as being mailed in printed form. In the days that followed, the Australian Federal Police visited major art galleries across the country, poring over extensive collections of Henson’s work looking for similar ‘offensive’ images. One regional art gallery was ordered to remove two of Henson’s works from its walls and websites. Some institutions voluntarily withdrew Henson’s pictures from public view, while other art dealers defiantly placed Henson’s work on prominent display in gallery windows.

The flurry of media debate around these events was heated and multilayered. Henson’s defenders pointed out that he had been producing provocative art involving adolescents for decades, and reminded the concerned public that the nude child was a legitimate art form dating back to the ancients. There was talk of Victorian prudery, witch hunts and moral panics. On the other side of the debate, Henson and the arts community were charged with failing to take seriously, and perhaps even fuelling, a perceived explosion of child pornography and paedophilia. The rights of the child to be protected against sexual commercial exploitation were invoked (Breakfast, ABC Radio National, 26 May 2008; Rundle 2008).

The debate escalated further following the publication of the July issue of Art Monthly Australia, which carried on its cover Polixeni Papapetrou’s 2003 work Olympia as Lewis Carroll’s Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs, featuring a photograph of the artist’s naked six-year-old daughter. The choice of cover image was made, said the magazine’s editor Maurice O’Riordan, ‘in the hope of restoring some dignity to the debate’ (O’Riordan 2008, 3), yet in the public domain it was widely perceived as an inflammatory act. The storm of public outcry that ensued led some government-funded cultural institutions to withdraw subscriptions from the art magazine and culminated with the Prime Minister – who had earlier declared the Henson picture ‘revolting’ – directing the Australia Council for the Arts to develop a set of protocols ‘on the representation of children in art’

Melinda Hinkson is a lecturer in anthropology and visual culture research in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Research School of Humanities, Australian National University. Her research interests include mediated interaction in Aboriginal Australia, the history of anthropology and processes of identity making in the present. Among her recent publications are An Appreciation of Difference: W. E. H. Stanner and Aboriginal Australia (co-edited with Jeremy Beckett, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008) and Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia (co-edited with Jon Altman, Arena Publications, 2007).
In this article I look beyond the debates over censorship that have occupied many commentators on the Henson furor to consider what this episode indicates about a contemporary cultural attitude to images. My use of the notion ‘cultural attitude’ is intended in the anthropological sense of shared understandings, emotions, values, orientations and ways of acting in relation to images that might be attributed not simply to individuals but to members of an identifiable community or social grouping. In this sense, a cultural attitude to images implies shared ways of thinking about, relating to, and animating images that in turn are associated with a distinctive notion of personhood. In attempting to analytically grasp something as seemingly elusive as a cultural attitude to images that might be generalised across time and space I draw upon recent work by art historian Hans Belting (2005a, b) and his proposal for an iconology that integrates the terms image, medium and body. In order to tease out some dimensions of what might be identified as a distinctively new attitude associated with post-industrialised societies, I explore a dominant form of that conjunction, one that manifests a mutually constitutive relationship between a reflexive individual and a particular kind of technologically mediated image. In exploring the social significance of this form of image I draw upon Didier Maleuvre’s (2006) critical interpretation of the art museum experience in the digital age and John Thompson’s (1995) notion of mediated intimacy. Arising from this discussion is a sense of the implications of failing to recognise the qualitative distinctiveness of differently mediated images and the particular kinds of visual experience with which they are associated. In conclusion, I suggest that the response to Henson’s picture reveals a newly dominant relationship between persons and images that confounds conventional distinctions between art and other kinds of images and requires careful analysis. Ultimately, I suggest, the Henson episode highlights the need to look beyond images themselves in order to understand what images are.

**TROUBLING IMAGES**

If an image offends very many people, sooner or later someone will invoke the law, and along with it judges, legislators, policymakers, and the police. The cry will go up that ‘there ought to be a law’ about offensive images, and symposia will be convened to formulate policy guidelines. (Mitchell 2005, 131)

Mitchell’s observation foretells events exactly as they unfolded recently in Australia, which at first glance would seem to lend the Henson case a predictability verging on the banal. But rather than see these events as simply replicating a form of iconoclash that is common in public responses to visual art and by no means confined to recent history, I will argue that there are dimensions of the Henson case that are the product of particular contemporary circumstances and point to the emergence of a new cultural attitude to images. Here I am concerned with our regard for and engagement with images as particular kinds of social things in the present.

The photographic medium in which Henson works and the themes he explores make his pictures an unsurprising target for a collision around visual cultural understandings of the present. Many of Henson’s works depict adolescents, often naked, hovering in the liminal spaces between childhood and adulthood. In his *Untitled* 1983–4 show, viewers encountered images of boys and girls – dirty, blood smeared and drug addled – loitering in scenes of decadence and decay. In more recent work, dark and blurrily fixed urban landscapes and night skies provide a somewhere–nowhere space through which young people wander, have sex, sleep, sometimes floating in mid-air. Here, as Dennis Cooper has observed, Henson depicts ‘a posterotic realm where sex [is] the only cure for unquenchable loneliness’ (Cooper 2003, 12). These pictures have the aesthetic quality of film stills; a fragmented gritty realism cut across with a surrealist sensibility. Henson’s work is characterised by a highly metaphoric composure. Where he deals with social decay his pictures are epic in their narrative force – his vision can be apocalyptic, drawing on the universal themes of life, death, sex, corruption, filtered through the distinctive psychological anxieties of adolescence and the excesses of late modernity. Some of his pictures have the quality of dreamscapes; they convey fragments of experience on the edge of euphoria or social abyss – a contradictory state depicted in a distinctive deep black background for which Henson is renowned, a black that threatens to absorb the rest of the picture.

Henson’s pictures echo, at times simultaneously, aspects of baroque painting and hyperreal advertising. This complexity is part of their richness and appeal; it gives Henson’s works a special volatility, but also the possibility of multiple conflicting interpretations by those who view them. In this sense they are pictures for our times; they invoke diverse referents and carry the capacity to speak simultaneously to the interests and experiences of diverse audiences.
The picture at the centre of the pornography allegation is, in the context of Henson’s oeuvre, relatively benign. It is an image of a naked young girl, her hands lightly but unselfconsciously shielding her genitals. Her eyes are downcast; she looks deeply caught up in her own inner world. There is no engagement with the viewer. Light radiates around her, halo-like. She is enveloped in Henson’s hallmark black – she may be emerging from this black or being consumed by it. It is an image ripe with metaphoric potency, of human life poised between the stages of girlhood and womanhood, and between the possibilities of enlightenment and infinite nothingness.

Twenty years ago, Australian writer David Malouf wrote of Henson that he is ‘a maker of magic’; that the relationship of his work to the technical process of photography is akin to that between poetry and ordinary speech. ‘The real subject of Henson’s art, Malouf suggested, ‘may be the act of looking itself’ (Malouf 1988, 9). Indeed, in Henson’s Untitled 1994–5 series the violence of representation itself becomes a central preoccupation: the images of naked youth stumbling around burnt-out car bodies are ripped and torn. Henson’s pictures demand much of the viewer if they are to be intelligible in the terms the artist has established. In this sense it might be said that they demand an interpretive regard.

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR A CULTURAL ATTITUDE TO IMAGES

What kinds of things are images? And where are we to begin in formulating something as seemingly elusive as a notion of a cultural attitude to images? In his 2005 article ‘Image, Medium, Body’, Hans Belting provides the beginnings of an approach to such questions by proposing what he describes as ‘a new kind of iconology’, a new model for thinking about the dynamic and dialectical process of engagement between the images we form in our heads and those we grasp in the external world. Belting’s model turns upon a triangulated relationship between the categories of ‘image’, ‘medium’ and ‘body’. An image is recognised here as a highly elusive category due to its fluctuation between mental and physical existence (see also Mitchell 1986). Belting defines an image in phenomenological terms, as the presence of an absence. Yet in order to exist at all, he observes, images need to be transmitted and perceived. In other words, images require a physical form, an agent or ‘medium’ through which transmission occurs, and a person, mind or ‘body’ that undertakes the work of perception.

Belting makes the deceptively simple observation that images are made present in, but not reducible to, the media through which they are expressed. Media, he suggests, are present in the way that bodies are present, while images are not. His triangular model is distinctively anthropological in that it implies an image is essentially meaningless, or unable to be made meaningful, to be called forth, unless it is grasped through the process of transmission and perception. On the face of it, Belting’s ‘new’ iconology could be seen to be predated by, or at least to share much in common with, a series of models for theorising representation, particularly those following Hall’s (1980) classic Encoding/Decoding formulation. Yet I would argue that the three terms he specifies and combines have a particular interpretive potency and significance, ironically perhaps, beyond what Belting himself seems yet to have grasped. In short, this potency lies in the model’s capacity not simply to interpret meaning across diverse visual forms, but to highlight the implications of distinctive forms of image mediation for the constitution of personhood. As I read him, there are echoes in Belting’s model of Walter Benjamin ([1936] 1999), in the double sense that Benjamin draws attention to both the loss of aura or anchorage in tradition that images undergo as they are mechanically reproduced and simultaneously their acquisition of a new capacity to envisage what it is to be human, in the invention of cinema, for example. Similarly, the influence of Marshall McLuhan’s notion ‘the medium is the message’ (1964) might be detected, as Belting’s model enables analysis of the social transformations that occur as an image is lifted out of one kind of context and made accessible in another via different mediation. Also brought to mind by this model is the cross-cultural particularity of the process of seeing documented by many anthropologists (see e.g. Forge 1970; Camille 2000; Kulick and Willson 2002; Morphy 2005), and the ways in which perception is mediated by distinctive bodily engagements with images that in turn reveal distinctive ways of ordering the world and social relations within it. It is a model whose generality, Belting suggests, ‘serves the purpose of bridging past and present in the life of images and that therefore is not limited to art’ (Belting 2005a, 303), and might be applied to diverse relations between persons and images across time and space.

Here I freely admit to reading more into Belting’s model than he himself has to date clearly articulated. Indeed, his two articles on the ‘new iconology’ published in English (Belting 2005a,b) raise more questions than they answer in relation to the delineation of the three terms and the relationship between them. The title of his
second article, ‘Towards an Anthropology of the Image’, suggests his ‘new iconology’ might be regarded more as an outline than a fully formulated analytical model. Across the case studies Belting explores, for example, the term ‘body’ is essentially directed to cognitive processes, notwithstanding his suggestion that images must be ‘performed’. Yet the term body seems ripe with a further potential – to focus interpretative attention at the bodily level of persons’ engagements with images, whether as producers or consumers of images, to look beyond perception as a mental process to pursue questions of how images come to mean, be performed, or internalised at the level of bodily dispositions (as theorised by Bourdieu 1977), for example, or in historically and culturally specific processes of subject formation (as illuminated by Foucault 1979). In short, Belting’s ‘body’ could usefully be taken to stand for ‘person’.

As suggested, Belting intends his formulation to be applied across time and space to explore the social significance and use of images in different circumstances. So, for example, in ancient European societies, those societies that created the images that are the focus of his Likeness and Presence (1994), Belting argues that important images were images of the dead or the gods. Images were created to reintegrate the deceased into living society, to make present, or replace, the body that was now absent. As images they were made present to people through the icons, relics, sculptures, and panels inlaid in the walls of churches that gave them form and located them, or made them present, in particular places. As suggested above, while his focus is not drawn in this direction, ‘body’ here seems ripe for further analytic exploration – that is, what characteristics of personhood were associated with a visual environment in which people-image relations were mediated in such specific forms, locations and occasions? To pursue such questions would be to begin to flesh out a sense of the distinctive cultural attitude to images that might be attributed to the Middle Ages (see also Camille 2000).

In regard to the configuration of image, media, body in the present, Belting observes that the contemporary body has entered a period of crisis; a crisis we might observe has come about as a result of our treatment of and mediated interaction with images in contemporary society. Belting puts it this way: ‘contemporary media have become invested with a paradoxical power over our bodies, which feel defeated in their presence’ (2005a, 312). While he does not elaborate on this observation, it might be suggested that if the important images of archaic societies were those produced to incorporate the dead within the time-space of the living (see also Freedberg 1989), post-industrial society can be characterised as creating images that defy the inevitability of death or the corporeal limits of the body. We produce images that we aspire to embody – images of unattainable youth, images of technologically mediated perfection, images that help fuel a consumption society predicated on the values of self-improvement. I shall return to explore this phenomenon below. For now it can be observed that an ‘image culture’ such as ours has many uses for images of youth, and many referent systems into which pictures such as those produced by Henson might be drawn and given meaning.

**CONSUMING IMAGES IN THE DIGITAL PRESENT**

The calls for Bill Henson to be charged as a child pornographer were based on public responses to digital reproductions of one of Henson’s works. It is a measure of the various ongoing ambiguities associated with this episode that permission to reproduce with this article the image at the centre of the furore has been declined by the artist’s representative. I could, however, if I wished easily download it from a number of weblogs on which it continues to circulate, which raises issues I’ll return to below. The image in question was circulated via a range of different media. Lifted out of the place it would have occupied in the gallery among its companion pictures which together formed an integrated visual narrative and offered a particular visual experience, the image was reproduced and circulated on a printed invitation, via various websites, and subsequently on dozens of newspaper pages and television news programmes. It was in these abstracted digital forms that the general public encountered the image. The truth, it was implied by those alleging the charge of pornography, was to be found within the image itself. Those who missed the first 24 hours of reportage encountered the image in its censored form, with a thick black band covering the subject’s chest, her face blurred by pixilation; it had become an image that seemed quite simply to confirm the charge of its pornographer were based on public responses to digital reproductions of one of Henson’s works. It is a measure of the various ongoing ambiguities associated with this episode that permission to reproduce with this article the image at the centre of the furore has been declined by the artist’s representative. I could, however, if I wished easily download it from a number of weblogs on which it continues to circulate, which raises issues I’ll return to below. The image in question was circulated via a range of different media. Lifted out of the place it would have occupied in the gallery among its companion pictures which together formed an integrated visual narrative and offered a particular visual experience, the image was reproduced and circulated on a printed invitation, via various websites, and subsequently on dozens of newspaper pages and television news programmes. It was in these abstracted digital forms that the general public encountered the image. The truth, it was implied by those alleging the charge of pornography, was to be found within the image itself. Those who missed the first 24 hours of reportage encountered the image in its censored form, with a thick black band covering the subject’s chest, her face blurred by pixilation; it had become an image that seemed quite simply to confirm the charge of its criminal associations and shut down the possibility of alternative readings.

Why is it that art pictures might evoke such a passionately negative response that other seemingly more straightforwardly sexualised images circulating in our society do not? Part of the answer to this question might be provided by way of another set of events that unfolded four days before the Henson scandal broke, when a small exhibition of high school students’ nude
life drawings were taken down from the walls of the Canberra Centre shopping mall following complaints from some shoppers. The Sunday Canberra Times was quick to point out the paradox, publishing on its front page pictures from the exhibition alongside one of the centre’s prominently displayed advertising images, in which we see the back of a young woman, naked from the waist up, provocatively revealing her left buttock as she pulls down her Wrangler jeans. In this seemingly mundane and contradictory clash over the moral coordinates of our visual culture, we can identify some of the characteristics of the new cultural attitude and the beginnings of an explanation of the furore around Bill Henson’s pictures.

If there is a dominant form of media through which we encounter images in the present, it is the screen. The invention of cinema heralded a new relationship between persons and images, an image without tangibility, an image that spectators could see but not hold (Greenberg, as read by Koss 2006, 145). Over the second half of the twentieth century the fleeting images of television and more recently the highly mobile images of digital cameras, mobile phones and the Internet have transformed the expanding visual field through which we apprehend the world and our place within it. Television and digital technologies provide us not just with so many sources of new visual information, but with a distinct visual engagement with the world, one which, much of the time, ends with the image itself. This is because these media are structured to treat qualitatively different kinds of information and images as if they are the same – news and advertising alike: a ‘flow’, as Raymond Williams characterised it (1974, 86) – quick, fleeting, flashing images to be apprehended, dealt with, before they are gone.

Fleeting advertising images have become such a pervasive dimension of everyday experience that much of the time we do not even register their presence. Advertising’s ubiquity and continual migration to new sites and new media give it perhaps unparalleled dominance of our visual environment. As a complex signifying system through which we engage with the world, advertising has its own distinctive means of orientation: advertising functions not simply as a vehicle for selling goods, as a key component of capitalism, but calls out a distinctive visual experience and along with it the engagement of a particular kind of viewing/consuming subject who produces meaning for the advertisement and simultaneously produces themselves (Williamson 1978).

Today advertisements address a consuming public that has an increasingly critical visual literacy and the capacity to move between different modes of technologised communication with ease. In the present we are confronted with a greater volume of advertising images – many of them sexualised – that seem to confront us everywhere we look. Moreover, the kind of visual experience demanded by advertising has itself undergone a profound shift. In the new aesthetics of advertising the seamless technicolour realism of an earlier period has given way to techniques that make representation itself central, acknowledging the presence of the camera through jerky hand-held digital video, grainy, blurred focus photographs, and decentred perspective (Goldman and Papson 1994, 63–4). The sovereignty of the consuming subject as interpreter of meaning has become further entrenched, but the subject hailed by these advertisements has to work harder than ever before to visualise themselves within the image presented and thereby create coherent meaning. In this sense the arbitrary nature of the sign has become an integral dimension of a new norm of visuality that is closely linked to a newly reflexive person who is required to undertake the work of interpretation.

In other societies we are familiar with collective ritual contexts being the equivalent site through which relations between persons and images are established and reproduced. The dominant form of image mediation associated with post-industrial societies occurs via a screen that is no longer located in the specific spaces of the cinema or lounge room, but rather has been freed up by a range of technological developments, from the Internet to the mobile phone, to take a central role in an expanding digital visual field through which persons apprehend the world and their place within it. Decontextualised representations have become so pervasive in our visual culture landscape that we scarcely take notice of them any more (Goldman and Papson 1994, 269). If fleeting, commercialised images have become the dominant form of picture we encounter on a day-to-day basis, if they have become naturalised, it seems clear that images that work in a different register – images that are differently mediated, such as the schoolchildren’s nude drawings hanging in the commercialised space of the shopping centre, or Henson’s pictures circulating through a mediated public sphere – are more likely to catch our attention. But as events around their removal from public display suggest, the ability of such images to ‘catch our attention’ does not necessarily ensure our empathetic regard for them.
Victor Burgin’s observation that photographs, unlike paintings and films, ‘lose themselves in the ordinary world they help to construct’ (2003, 130) is particularly compelling in terms of thinking about the commodified dimensions of our visual culture environment. Aspects of what I am calling the new cultural attitude to images are of course as old as photography itself. The ambiguity John Berger identified as one of photography’s defining characteristics (Berger 1982, 91) continues to explain much of the potency of the medium. Photography was lauded on its invention for its unprecedented ability to visually capture reality or absolute truth. Yet, in freezing in time an image of an instant from a flow of experience, photography produced a truth never encountered before, one requiring new kinds of contextual explanation and simultaneously giving rise to new ways of seeing. The tension between two ways of regarding photographs – as transparent evidence on the one hand or as complex and ambiguous representations on the other, and sometimes as both at once – remains at the heart of why photographs continue to be so compelling and so troublesome.2

Henson’s critics ignore the distinction and tension between evidence and representation. For Hetty Johnston, the campaigner against child sexual assault who made the pornography allegation against Henson, all images of naked children are ultimately the same: sexual images and evidence of the exploitation of children by adults (Ferris and Jolly 2008, 5). Johnston argues, ‘It is the Best [sic] interests of the child that are at the centre of this debate . . . It is a contest between those defending the historical rights and freedoms of the Arts and those defending today’s rights and freedoms of our young. One cannot be achieved without the sacrifice of the other’ (Johnston 2008, n.p.). Such a ‘rights’ view dismisses representation altogether and recognises no role for art as a set of distinctive forms of practice, commentary, visualisation that might reflect insightfully and critically upon the social circumstances in which the phenomenon of child pornography is said to have flourished. Similarly, the Prime Minister’s declaration that the image was ‘revolting’ is part of a process that wrenches it out of the category of art – or representation – and into the realm of the real.

On the other side of the debate, Henson’s supporters wrote in defence of the need for an appreciation of artworks in context, for the recognition of the artist’s intentions, for judgement of artistic merit, and for the differentiation of commercial images from more complex representations (see e.g. Benjamin 2008; Annear in Skatssoon 2008). These perspectives see art as autonomous from the world it depicts. We thus have a logjam of perspectives: all reality on one side, representation on the other. What complicates this logjam in particular ways are the actions of the artist and his agents whose aim is to sell these pictures. So what, in the context of a gallery space, might be experienced as a carefully conceptualised and holistic visual narrative, is intentionally fragmented into single images for promotional purposes, and then sold as a series of individual commodities. Viewed from this perspective, as Nigel Lendon has suggested (personal communication, 11 March 2009), context can be read as a marketing ploy.

The temporal dimension of the new digitally mediated visual environment has particular consequences for our engagement with images conveyed through other media, including art images. As Maleuvre suggests, the ‘tyranny of the flashing picture’ has ‘damaged our capacity to sustain a long, patient, probing conversation with them’ (Maleuvre 2006, 167–8). Maleuvre is identifying implications for the process of looking at images in general, as ‘looking at an image has been made equal to being grabbed by it and getting the message’. We look ‘only for what is wanted’ (Maleuvre 2006, 168). Rather than looking as an act of contemplation we look to decode, to understand, to ‘get it’ and move on.

The Internet enables an ever wider range of different kinds of images, including pornography, to be accessed in digital form, and places few restrictions on the uses to which these images might be put. The logic of the Internet actively facilitates images being lifted from websites through the use of powerful search engines. This might be construed as a practical acceleration of a process Benjamin observed 70 years ago – ‘the desire of masses to bring things “closer”’ (Benjamin [1936] 1999, 75). Such a structuring approach to images implies its own ethics of circulation: rather than giving primacy to the contexts from which images come, or to their producers, we privilege the viewing subject and whatever meaning she might wish to give an image. Digitised images become the preserve of individualised meaning making.

That this attitude has been carried across to our engagements with images that are differently mediated, including art pictures, will be familiar to anyone who has visited any of the great European galleries in recent years – as tour groups, digital video cameras firmly clutched to eyes, rush through the gallery space honing their viewfinders in on the great masters, before rushing on to the next tourist site on their checklist. To record is to see. But see what? Maleuvre puts it like this:
Everyday life today is in the grip of generalized esthetic commotion where commerce, information, advertising and propaganda pull the senses hither and thither, blanketing every square inch of available mental space. Everywhere the dazzle of fast and loud electronic media fights for our eyes and ears, keeps the mind on nervous alert, sampling everything but tasting nothing. For taste requires time . . . (Maleuvre 2006, 166)

The blurry visual field in which Henson’s work might be mistaken for pornography or advertising reminds us that when we encounter any image, our responses are significantly influenced by the broader social environment from which we acquire dispositions and draw meanings. In a fleeting advertising image-saturated society, the circulation of such images increasingly mediates and influences our engagement with other kinds of images, including works of art. How do we distinguish between art and advertising, or pornographic images, if our mode of engagement with each is the same? Why would art pictures such as those created by Henson be particularly susceptible to a hostile response in the present? Precisely because they stand precariously on the edge of the visual cultural environment I have been sketching. They are pictures that ask to be contemplated. But sharing so much of the aesthetic of fleeting images, invoking shared referents, putting viewers in mind of postmodern advertising images and films, commenting on the social phenomena they simultaneously convey, and being photographs rather than paintings – Henson’s pictures cannot but occupy a contradictory place.3

**IMAGE, BODY, MEDIUM REVISITED**

Of course our interactions with images occur, as Belting reminds us, not just in reference to other images but through our bodies. In his model the body is not simply a cipher that ‘receives’ images, but a medium of engagement and enactment. Bodies perform images as much as they perceive them (Belting 2005a, 311). While Belting does not elaborate on what he means by this, his model can be interpreted to suggest that our bodily selves are deeply implicated and indeed constituted in the image worlds we create, inhabit, internalise – a process anthropologists highlight as culturally inflected. I suggested earlier that our own society might be characterised as creating images that defy the inevitability of death and the corporeal limits of the body.4 Advertising images of unattainable youthfulness feed a value system that places particular importance on self-image, on surface appearance. One of the more obvious expressions of this cultural attitude is revealed in the finding that in the past year Australians have spent more per capita than Americans on cosmetic surgery procedures (ABC News, 13 March 2008). Here we perhaps find a new form of presencing that could be considered against what Belting shows us for the Middle Ages: rather than inventing images to bring the dead within the social world of the living, we invent images which defy the inevitability of death, images we aspire to embody – as increasing numbers of us attempt to make our bodies over in the manner of the image, to collapse image and body together, as if their mediation might be transcended. Here the nexus of image, medium and body is shown to be a core site of cultural production and identity formation, and our relations to images to have particular implications for the way we produce and understand our very humanity.

But youthful images require young bodies from which to create likenesses. And this brings us to two further conjunctions of image, medium and body that are characteristic of our times and implicated in the Henson furore: ‘corporate paedophilia’ (Rush and La Nauze 2006) and child pornography. I have suggested that the outcry against Henson is somewhat paradoxical given the widespread circulation of overtly sexualised imagery that is integral to the post-industrial commodity market. Contemporary advertising and the fashion industry in particular use images of increasingly younger bodies to sell goods. Whether these images make use of children parading as adults, or children parading as children with commodity aspirations and closely associated sexual desires, they highlight another complex dimension of our contemporary cultural attitude to images and social value. In 2006 the Australia Institute, an independent think tank, announced recently completed research that implicated major retailer David Jones in the practice of what it called ‘corporate paedophilia’, or the sexualisation of young children for advertising purposes.5 The outraged reactions of parents to the suggestion that they were facilitating their children’s participation in such practice reveal how deeply the values of the market have been drawn into the structuring of an attitude to images that has become widely prevalent – this attitude sees the transformation of a person (whether child or adult) into an image circulating in mainstream society as the height of social achievement. Reality TV and other aspects of contemporary public culture promote the idea that such transformation is both universally desirable and within the grasp of any of us.
At the most abhorrent end of the spectrum of the diverse forms of imagery into which persons might be transformed is child pornography; here the distinction between representation and reality collapses with the most appalling implications. It has been widely recognised that the Internet makes pornographic images more accessible, and reduces the cost of access and risk of being caught by those producing, consuming and collecting pornographic material. Clearly child pornography is in itself evidence of the existence of child sexual assault. Yet in their thoughtful study of what they describe as ‘a paradigmatic example of contemporary crime’ (Taylor and Quayle 2003, 2), Taylor and Quayle problematise widespread assumptions about pornography when they argue that research continues to find ‘very little systematic evidence on the relationship between child pornography and [subsequent] sexual assaults on children’ (Taylor and Quayle 2003, 13). They argue that generalised claims of a causal relationship between viewing material and acting in the world are problematic, warning that links between the consumption of particular kinds of images and certain social behaviours cannot be assumed and have not been proven. Taylor and Quayle also observe that the range of visual material found to be collected by individuals convicted on charges of possessing child pornography tends to extend well beyond what might be conventionally regarded as sexual images. They point out that images become sexualised as they are taken up in social practice (Taylor and Quayle 2003, 24).

Taylor and Quayle’s study highlights complexities in person/image relations that are ignored by child-abuse campaigners such as Hetty Johnston and others who simply urge for the rights of children to be privileged above those of artists and other image makers. Their analytic emphasis would seem to have wider applicability, and could be mobilised in response to a range of claims of causal links between consumption of various forms of ‘offensive’ images and ‘pathological’ behaviours. In other words, an image cannot be assumed to speak its own truth.

**SEEING, RECIPROCITY AND MEDIATED INTIMACY**

In the new cultural attitude to images the process of seeing and its bodily basis has itself been reconstituted. In the same way that the Internet makes images of child pornography more accessible, so too with other kinds of images. If the Internet is understood to have radically reconstituted the relationship between public and private viewing spaces, so too the physical delineation of spaces once associated with distinctive visual experiences has been breached. One no longer has to physically enter the space of the art gallery or museum in order to ‘see’ art. Virtual tours, online databases, social-networking and image-sharing sites, and virtual worlds such as Second Life provide new digital avenues for individuals to access art images from the relative comfort of their computer chairs. It is true that some kind of democratisation occurs in this process; for example, barriers that might have kept certain individuals and members of social groups from entering cultural institutions and engaging with art are dissolved. But in the process this new form of access also brings people in contact with images they might not under other circumstances seek out. It also profoundly reconstitutes the viewing experience.

The way the Internet structures access to images around notions of freedom of information, ease of use and speed of delivery might be suggestive of an unmediated experience, but the Internet in fact intensifies technological mediation. This abstract experience replaces the distinctive and multilayered experience of entering a particular space at a particular time to stand before and look purposefully at particular pictures. In transcending the need for such fully rounded sensual engagement with images, the Internet encourages us to conceive of images as autonomous things, as things that are unmediated, things that are there for us to treat as we wish.

The new mediated publicness, as John Thompson describes it, elevates vision – in the narrow sense of seeing with the eyes – to ‘a new level of historical significance’ (Thompson 1995, 129). Associated with these developments is the emergence of a new ‘mediated intimacy’ in which we form relations of interest and emotional ties to others with whom we will never share physical space or any other mode of engagement beyond the mediated encounters offered by cinema, television, magazine, Internet. The iconic form of this mode of attachment is that between fan and celebrity. What is distinctive about these new intimate relations is that they do away with the reciprocity that structures face-to-face interactions. In face-to-face relations intimacy is achieved as a result of a two-way flow of speech and actions in which a self who is physically present to another tests ideas, insights, orientations against those of the other, who responds. Through such densely sensual interaction recognition occurs, trust is established, understandings are reached. In mediated intimacy, by contrast, the self unilaterally produces meanings for an image of an other who will never respond. Here the self is compelled to be actively engaged in the production of
identity in a way that is without historical precedent (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2001).

Today, Thompson observes, we live in a world in which ‘the capacity to experience is disconnected from the activity of encountering’ (Thompson 1995, 129). There are clear parallels between the processes Thompson describes and the distinction drawn by Maleuvre between the kinds of visual engagement engendered by the fleeting image and those called out by art pictures. ‘Genuine seeing,’ Maleuvre suggests, ‘is a form of cultivating. It is the opposite of taking. It consists in enhancing and highlighting what lies outside of us’ (Maleuvre 2006, 169). In other words, for Maleuvre, genuine seeing is reciprocal, it is opposed to the self-conscious self-interested mode of engagement called out by the fleeting image. To enter into this form of engagement requires us to attempt to occupy the space of the picture, to make its acquaintance, approach it on its own terms, rather than draw it closer, reduce it to the logic of the fleeting image.

Rather than see reciprocity as the requirement for a kind of engagement that might be privileged as genuine, which implies that much of contemporary visual experience is akin to alienation or is in some sense unreal, Thompson observes that the challenge faced by individuals is how to integrate these different kinds of experience – the face-to-face and the technologically mediated – into a coherent life trajectory (Thompson 1995, 209). If we were to extend this analysis specifically to our interactions with images, we might suggest that the challenge is to retain a clear sense of the distinction between images that are differently mediated and the particular visual experiences with which they are associated. As the Henson case makes all too clear, such distinctions are becoming increasingly difficult to draw.

That such distinction might be at risk is further suggested by the recent release of the National Review of Visual Education report that recommends studies in ‘visuacy’ be introduced as a foundation skill in School Art Education, ‘The capacity to experience is disconnected from the activity of encountering’ (Thompson 1995, 129). There are clear parallels between the processes Thompson describes and the distinction drawn by Maleuvre between the kinds of visual engagement engendered by the fleeting image and those called out by art pictures. ‘Genuine seeing,’ Maleuvre suggests, ‘is a form of cultivating. It is the opposite of taking. It consists in enhancing and highlighting what lies outside of us’ (Maleuvre 2006, 169). In other words, for Maleuvre, genuine seeing is reciprocal, it is opposed to the self-conscious self-interested mode of engagement called out by the fleeting image. To enter into this form of engagement requires us to attempt to occupy the space of the picture, to make its acquaintance, approach it on its own terms, rather than draw it closer, reduce it to the logic of the fleeting image.

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That such distinction might be at risk is further suggested by the recent release of the National Review of Visual Education report that recommends studies in ‘visuacy’ be introduced as a foundation skill in Australian schools. The report’s authors call for a new conceptualisation of texts in the context of the English classroom, one might similarly do so in relation to a continuum of images from the most banal to the most aesthetically complex and challenging (‘Literacy, Numeracy and Now “Visuacy” in School Art Education’, The Australian, 8 August 2008, emphasis added). Here art historian T. J. Clark’s plea for pictures to be protected from being incorporated or ‘made fully part’ of the new visual environment comes to mind, where ‘fully part’ implies a picture being stripped of its contextual media so that it might be made to mean anything we like, as a celebration of ‘art coming down from its ivory tower’ (Clark 2006, 122). If images can be made to mean anything at all, then they lose their capacity to mean altogether. It may seem paradoxical that the proponents of ‘visuacy’, along with both Henson’s critics and his supporters, share something significant in common. All dissolve Belting’s distinction between image and media, and regard images as things that might speak for themselves.

The report on ‘visuacy’ was commissioned by the previous conservative Howard government, and as yet it is unclear whether it will be endorsed by the Rudd government. But its publication is timely and highlights some of the broader contradictory tensions at work in state interventions in our visual culture environment. Paradoxically the government seeks to control circulation of images through the development of ‘protocols’ to govern the treatment of children in art (which came into effect in January this year), as well as to ‘halt access to child pornography, x-rated and violent material’ (‘Stephen Conroy Wades into Child Porn Net Flood’, The Australian, 8 January 2008) at the same time as it promises to provide every school child with access to a computer and radically enhance Australia’s broadband capacity.

**CONCLUSION: SEEING BEYOND THE MORAL PANIC**

The spectre of child pornography carries a kind of determining moral force against which art’s defenders can easily falter. Just a week after passing Henson’s file to the Department of Public Prosecutions, the Australian Federal Police announced they had ‘cracked’ a major paedophile ring in which as many as 1500 Australians might be implicated. In times like these those who speak in defence of the free expression of artists are likely to be scorned as detached from reality. In the complex visual culture environment I have sketched, curators, commercial art dealers, art historians, critics and commentators face an unprecedented set of challenges in getting their views about art taken seriously by that elusive social body, the general public. It is no longer enough to simply defend art’s exploration of sexual themes against the charge of pornography on the grounds that it has always done so. Those who dismiss Henson’s critics on the basis that he has been making
this art for decades overlook the fact that over that period something important has shifted in our visual culture environment that reconfigures relations between images and bodies which needs to be taken into account.

The Henson furore highlights the fact that we may well need to develop some new ways of thinking about sexualised imagery, including pornography. In an era where sex is used to sell everything, the label ‘porn’ is freely applied to phenomena as diverse as television cooking shows and high-tech military warfare. We may need new ways of distinguishing – and indeed grasping the relationship between – abhorrent acts of sexual abuse and oppression of persons, the production and consumption of differently mediated images, and a generalised aesthetic tendency in our visual culture.

Public debate needs to come to terms with the processes that have given rise to an increasingly sexualised public culture, and simultaneously to register the critical contributions made by image makers who reflect upon and interpret these circumstances.

The disjunction between the law, which remains firmly fixed on context, and public opinion in this case leaves the post-Henson wash-up deeply ambiguous. Notably, at the height of the debate Kevin Rudd was insistent that he made his comments as a parent, not as the Prime Minister. He carefully delineated public perspective from law (Marr 2008, 124). The Australia Council has released protocols for artists working with children that came into effect in January 2009, but primarily these direct attempts at codification or legislation can deal with. More complex set of issues at work here than any requests for permission to reproduce with this article the picture at the centre of the pornography allegation have been declined. The image, however, can easily be located and downloaded via Google. So, it would seem, there is a more complex set of issues at work here than any attempts at codification or legislation can deal with.

If the lines of definition between art pictures and other kinds of mediated images are becoming increasingly blurred, they are by no means dissolved. But as digital images become ubiquitous, increasingly in art as much as in advertising, we face a challenge to maintain an appreciation of the qualitative distinctiveness of different kinds of visual experience. The Henson scandal gives us the beginnings of a sense of what is at stake in holding on to such distinctions. Arguably, what is ultimately at stake in all of this is empathy itself – the capacity to be affected by images, and through them by other persons, in ways that transcend the self-referential concerns of contemporary identity formation; to see that images are more than what we make of them, more than just images.

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NOTES

[1] See also Belting 2005b. The two essays summarise Belting’s book Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft (Belting 2001), which is yet to be published in English.

[2] These dimensions of photographic culture have been discussed in detail and from diverse perspectives by many; see, for example, Sonntag 1977; Crimp 1999; Sekula 1999.

[3] As of course does an increasing amount of art that is produced using digital media.

[4] Donna Haraway’s (1991) ‘cyborg manifesto’ is one of the more celebratory accounts of the transcendence of biology as constitutive of subjective identity and demonstrates some aspects of the new fusion of image, technology and body that characterises the present. For a more critical interpretation of how abstract technologised processes are internalised in bodies, see James and Carkeek (1997).


[6] Notwithstanding the fact that an increasing number of these pictures are likely to be moving, as art galleries move to embrace video and digital art forms.

[7] A small number of celebrity worshippers ‘lose sight of the symbolic boundary’ that separates face-to-face and mediated experience (Thompson 1995, 225), a situation that can lead to various forms of compulsive activity – at its most extreme, stalking. American psychologists have dubbed this phenomenon ‘celebrity worship syndrome’ and described forms of anti-social behaviour with which increasing intensities of the ‘syndrome’ are associated (Maltby, Houran, and McCutcheon 2003).

[8] There is an emerging body of scholarly literature that sees computer-based creative work not in terms of a retreat
from rounded sensual engagement in the world but as having its own distinctive sensual repertoire (see e.g. Jones 2006; Munster 2006).

[9] Of course there are complex reverberations to be explored here in critical debates around the emergence of the post-disciplinary field of visual studies, which are beyond the scope of this article (but see Mitchell 2005, especially chapter 16).


REFERENCES


