

SERIOUS PLAY

What are we to make of these images, Polixeni Papapetrou's re-stagings of a selection of photographs of young girls, originally taken by Lewis Carroll, the Victorian author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), under his real name Charles Lutwidge Dodgson?¹ Papapetrou shares with us her photographic fascinations: amongst them the relations between photographer and subject and the interpretative possibilities generated by the viewer of photographs. Dodgson's tableaux vivants, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy, offer a vehicle for teasing out these interests through the imaginative theatre of childhood.

The staged child tableau in photography has an intriguing historical legacy. In the mid nineteenth century, Julia Margaret Cameron and Clementina, Lady Hawarden, as well as Dodgson, had girls and young women pose for their cameras (Cameron and Hawarden working with their daughters). Dodgson's favourite models, Alexandra Kitchin, Alice Liddell, Julia Arnold, Irene MacDonald and others played dress-ups for his camera, in romantic roles as Chinese tea merchants, shipwrecked orphans, beggar maids, Little Red Riding Hood or dressed in simple night attire languidly reflecting or sleeping. The iconography of these Victorian images distinguished the role of the child from the rational, active adult world. It is this affect of otherworldliness, of ambiguity, residing in Dodgson's images in particular, that strikes contemporary viewers.

Dodgson was working at a time of heightened enquiry into human behaviour and character. Charles Darwin published *The Origin of the Species* in 1852, in a period when photography was employed for scientific as well as popular purposes, from the investigation of human characteristics and types in anthropological photography (for example, in psychiatric research, documenting facial expressions in efforts to comprehend interior states), to the increasingly conventionalised studio portraiture developing with the popularity of the *carte-de-visite*.

Dodgson's representations of childhood can also be associated with the Victorian neo-Romantic 'sensibility' that valued highly emotive responses to life and art, sentiment over morals. During the emergence of modernism, industrial economies and individualism over the previous century, societal perception of the child altered from being a small adult to a junior member of the family needing a protective and nurturing domestic environment. These changing attitudes acknowledged the potential for sexuality within now innocent childhood and supported institutionalising social reforms to discourage sexual behaviour, such as legislating the age of consent.² By the mid nineteenth century, depictions of childhood in art and writing were wide ranging, presenting mythical and literary characters, mocking adult behaviour and both suggesting innocent worlds lost to adults as well as sinisterly questioning childhood virtue.

A mathematics lecturer at Christ Church, Oxford, lover of theatre, music and art, and a religious man, Dodgson was well aware of the agency of freedom and purity assigned to childhood. He employed the documentary medium of photography to create romantic and symbolic images, with themes that would have been familiar to Victorian viewers.³ In crossing gender, class, race and a range of emotional states, the ambiguity of his images excites intriguing responses. Subsequent interpretation ranges from the spiritual to eroticised, reception fueled by the mystery surrounding the posthumous destruction of sections of his diaries. Regardless of the photographer's intent, Dodgson's female subjects in their theatres of reverie, continue to provoke the viewer's imagination and provoke strong reactions.

For nearly three years, Papapetrou's daughter Olympia has volunteered herself for the role of subject. The result is both a pictorial catalogue of a (working) relationship between mother and daughter, and the record of a complex vision of childhood, of youth both represented and lived. As Olympia, and sometimes her friends, is documented engaging in rudimentary costumed mise-en scene for the camera and for us as viewers, how does she conceive or imagine her connection with her ghostly Victorian models, or with her mother-photographer? Does her desire to be seen differ from that of Dodgson's subjects, whose imaginative play she is knowingly replicating? What difference does Papapetrou insert as a woman photographer?

Like her Victorian predecessor, Papapetrou's work also apparently plays with the viewer's mind. If we no longer invest in the illusionism of photography, are we discrediting Olympia's imaginative faith by equating her performance with the overt fakery of her props and the unmodish source of her inspiration? Should we be concerned that Papapetrou encourages her young subjects to be adult in their role-playing? How is Olympia's subjectivity acknowledged within the character that two adults have predetermined for her? Is her determination of self influenced by seeing herself as other? If, in light of Freudian and post-Freudian theorizations of the formation of identity and sexuality and the context of advertising and the proliferation of pornography in contemporary visual culture, photographs of children have become problematic in suggesting the potential for defiled innocence, what might this mean for the maintenance of ethical relationships between viewers and subjects, and artist?⁴ And for ourselves, how would we reflect on our own childish playacting? Or interpret that of our children?

Rather than reflecting specifically on either the condition of childhood, or adult consciousness, Papapetrou's images celebrate and test the field of play between adults and children. Her photographs question performative behaviour, its codes, representation and purpose, and acknowledge the instability of interpretative meaning. If we place ourselves between the imaginations of Dodgson and Papapetrou, we can find in Walter Benjamin's uncompleted Arcades Project of the 1920s a perspective that both acknowledged the partiality of the medium of photography and advocated the political potential of the symbolic space of childhood, a space of imagination which offered adults the capacity to empower revolutionary thought in an industrial capitalist world. The play of children is licence to an alternative reality that, envisioned and enacted by photography, remains always within the sight of adult love and desire.

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1. Although an amateur photographer, Charles Dodgson began making album prints in 1856, purchasing the most innovative wet-collodion process equipment. He abandoned the hobby in 1880 when gelatin dry-plate processes which he did not favour came into general use.

2. Writers on Dodgson's images surmise, from his destruction of his plates and the fact that few photographs remain in his possession, that Dodgson understood the compromising nature of his pictures of nude children. Being women, Cameron and Hawarden avoid the erotic implications of a gendered gaze and Cameron also employed pictorial strategies such as religious mise-en-scene and soft focus.

3. It was noted in a newspaper of the day that Dodgson did not let his subjects fall into poses but played elaborate games with the children to encourage them to dress and pose as naturally as possible. Morton N. Cohen, 'Lewis Carroll: Pioneer Photographer' in Cohen, *Reflections in a Looking Glass*, Aperture, New York, 1998, pp. 20-22. Dodgson also often left extraneous detail in the framing of the image.

4. The fear of offending viewing sensibilities is shared by Victorian and contemporary photographer alike. Just as Dodgson ensured he did not retain photos of girls posing naked, Papapetrou chose not to show scenes where Olympia interpreted Dodgson's few extant nude images.