The "Puer Optionis:" Contemporary childhood adultization, spectacularization, and sexualization

Davide Cino

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to conceptualize postmodern childhood by suggesting the expression "Puer Optionis" as a way to summarize the condition of contemporary children in the Western world. Why are our children prone to looking for an audience? According to some academics, our *Zeitgeist* evolved and, along with it, the values spread through our children have changed, shifting from communitarian and altruistic to individualistic and narcissistic (Uhls, Greenfield, 2011). In a "spectacularized" society (Codeluppi, 2007), fame and desire for visibility are shown as goals to be reached during a developmental phase, childhood, where the construction of a belief system (Bandura A. et al., 1963) can considerably magnify them. Three examples of "showcases" are suggested, regarding the child spectacularization process: the city; the stage; social networking sites (SNS), opening a short parenthetical about "*Sharenting*." Finally, an evolution of the *Imaginary Audience* theory by David Elkind (Elkind, 1967) will be assessed: in a world where every aspect of our lives can be dragged into the spotlight, is this audience still "imaginary?" What are the implications for our children and the educational challenges we face as educators?

L'articolo propone un'analisi di alcuni aspetti dell'infanzia postmoderna, abitata da quello che viene definito "Puer Optionis": il bambino adultizzato dell'*attuale*. Nell'intento di supportare la tesi per cui certi indicatori del nostro *Zeitgeist* stanno rendendo sempre più flebili i confini tra mondo adulto e infantile, verranno presentati i concetti di adultizzazione, vetrinizzazione e sessualizzazione. Lo scopo sarà, da un lato, proporre una breve analisi rispetto a una possibile genealogia del desiderio di fama e visibilità che caratterizza le attuali società occidentali; dall'altro, evidenziare tre "vetrine" dove, concretamente, l'infanzia si trova esposta: la città; il palcoscenico; i social networks (aprendo una prima parentesi sul fenomeno dello Sharenting). Come corollario a questa analisi si cercherà, infine, di riflettere sull'evoluzione del costrutto dell'*Imaginary Audience* di David Elkind (Elkind, 1967), in quella che Jeremy Rifkin ha definito *fase drammaturgica* (Rifkin, 2009), in cui tutti sono attori e spettatori reali. Quali le implicazioni di questo clima sociale che, informalmente, educa su scala giornaliera bambine e bambini?

KEY WORDS: childhood, adultization, desire for fame, puer optionis, sharenting

PAROLE CHIAVE: infanzia, adultizzazione, vetrinizzazione, puer optionis, sharenting

Introduction

Postmodern childhood has been discussed several times and as many terms have been proposed to describe it: *disappeared, hurried, lost, wasted…* (Postman N., 1984; Elkind D., 1969/2001; Olfman S., 2005, Contini M., Demozzi S., 2016; Demozzi S., 2016). In the effort of building a bridge with the intellectual work of these authors, I am going to suggest a new term to describe the contemporary child, henceforth known as "Puer Optionis". First of all, thanks are due to Urlich Beck for the intellectual inspiration coming from his expression "Homo Optionis", used to define the condition of contemporary men and women (Beck U., Beck-Gernsheim E., 2005).

According to Demozzi, postmodern children are "tiny adults," whereas the author describes the adultization process as: "*a premature adoption of attitudes, behaviors, and expression, typical of grownups by children*" (Demozzi S., 2016, p.46, auth.trans.). This being said, if the boundaries between children's and adults' world is becoming thinner, I find it appropriate to propose a new word to describe these "tiny adults" who inhabit our world.

As Contini states, the Western world's children are *overloaded* because they are victim to a busy life that leads to a cognitive overload, and *lacking in* downtime during which they can imagine, learn, and play on their own, discover the world around them, or even just be bored (Contini M., 2010). Because *necessity is the mother of invention*, a "positive" boredom – according to the Latin etymology "ponere", meaning "to create/build" – is needed in order for a child to show agency when it comes to being creative and clever. However, the Puer Optionis finds himself/herself in front of a lot of educational "options" about toys, clothes, food, etc., not only *tyrannical* (because there are so many), but also *already proposed* by someone else – the adult.[i]

1. A matter of values

What educational options do our children deal with on a daily basis? In order to answer this question, it is worth considering Tramma's reflections about informal education (Tramma S., 2009): anything we are surrounded by can potentially have an educational impact on us. Not only what is spread through formal learning environments, but also informal (e.g. mass media, ICT, cultural climate, etc.). From this perspective, topics widely discussed in social sciences can be properly tackled from a pedagogical point of view by trying to understand what kind of impact certain stimuli can have on people in terms of the creation and strengthening of old and new habits and what education professionals can do about it.

It is impossible to talk about education without mentioning the meaningful plethora of values that, according to the Social Systems theories, surrounds children and adults and have an "educational" impact on them (Luhmann N., 1990; Bronfenbrenner U., 2002). In the following pages I will try to analyze *some* of the contemporary risk factors in childhood. In doing so, this perspective will be taken: the more time spent with whatever educational stimuli and the less critical thinking skills, the higher the impact on one's mind. At this point we may want to wonder what kind of values are currently spread in the Western world. In order to answer this challenging question, a good reference point can be found in what Contini defined as the *money-power-success* triad: a hedonistic ambition that, according to the author, provides a good account of what people in rich countries tend to (Contini M., 2009). Although these are certainly not the only Western hallmarks, the fact that individualistic and narcissistic principles can influence children is a matter worth further debate. In a globalized world where, along with wares and people, information, knowledge and ideas also circulate, we may want to wonder where these values come from.

As ambitious as a question like this can sound, it is important to consider my investigation as susceptible to further critique. Namely, bearing in mind that the present contribution *tries to* propose a brief analysis of *some* index of our *Zeitgeist*, not all of them (Miller G.A., Buckhout R., 1975). However, I find a possible key in the *asymmetrical contact* between cultures (Cuevas A., 2000).

According to sociologist and *Americanization* theorist George Ritzer, whereas the original goal of global societies was to support "increasing opportunities for self-transformation and bricolage", the simultaneous Americanization process led to "the dominance of American consumer and media culture on the world scene", which is not to say that American products cannot be differently interpreted according to a given cultural context, but "only to suggest that American cultural artifacts are an increasingly central element of global culture" (Ritzer G., Stillman T., 2003, pp. 36-37).

Talking about American culture, it is impossible not to mention the moral, political, and social philosophy of the American Dream. To that end, Horatio Alger's novels are noteworthy due to the role they played in guiding American people in the strenuous path toward social rescue after the American Civil War (1861-65), referencing protestant values and their promise of success for deserving people as proof of God's will (Scharnhorst G., Bales J., 1981, 1985; Nackenoff C., 1994). Michael Moore, in turn, describes Horatio Alger's writing as a "nice drug" that:

It is first prescribed to us as children in the form of a fairy tale - but a fairy tale that can actually come true! [...] Alger was one of the most popular American writers of the late 1800s. His stories featured characters from impoverished backgrounds who, through pluck and determination and hard work, were able to make huge successes of themselves in this land of boundless opportunity. The message was that anyone can make it in America, and make it big. We are addicted to this happy rags-to-riches myth in this country. (Moore M.. 2004; Maffi M., 2012, p.520).

Our *Zeitgeist* evolved along with its index. Apparently, so did the American Dream's values. American historian Matthew Warshauer claims that, following the industrialization of the 19th and 20th centuries, the dream of success achievable through hard work, education, and thrift was eroded and replaced by a philosophy of "get rich quick" (Warshauer M., 2003). This notion, far from the original intent of the Dream as well as how many people still see it, pairs well with the capitalistic idea that the higher the income, the more material goods are purchasable. This means "the ability to purchase a big house and a nice car separates those who are considered successful from those who are not" (Warshauer M., 2003).

In this respect, inspired by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's work "*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*" (Tonnies F., 1887), with her *Theory of social change and human development*, Patricia Greenfield highlights how the passage from *community* (Gemeinschaft) to *society* (Gesellschaft) and the consequent sociodemographic and cultural changes operated to alter developmental pathways (Greenfield P.M., 2009; 2015). Cultural values, along with formal and informal learning environments changed due to urbanization, commercialization, and technological development, causing an increase in individualistic values children learn about through a wide spectrum of Agents of Socialization (e.g. family, school, peers, media, etc.).

For instance, what kinds of values spread by television content are children entertained by? A study conducted at the Children's Digital Media Center at UCLA shows that from 1967 to 2007 some of the most popular TV shows among nine- to eleven-year-old tweens (such as *The Lucy Show*, *Happy Days*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *American Idol*, *Hannah Montana*, etc.) portrayed increasingly individualistic values (Uhls Y.T., Greenfield P.M., 2011). Fame, achievement, popularity, financial success, power, etc. progressively rose in importance during these decades. Fame, in particular, made a drastic shift not only from 1967, but also from 1997 to 2007. Though many factors could have caused the associated changes, according to the authors the shift in the importance of certain values, like fame, may be caused by the expansions of communication technologies, which was particularly relevant in the U.S. in the decade 1997-2007. Values like community feeling, benevolence, and tradition, in turn, declined in TV shows that, if on the one hand, can be swayed by social conducts and cultural changes, have, at the same time, an impact on them. For the sake of a better understanding of this paper, it is central to mention the reversal in importance of community feeling and fame. Moreover, further research inspired by this study showed how children embraced the desire for fame and visibility, using technology as a way to show off and reach an audience (Uhls Y.T., Greenfield P.M., 2011; Uhls, Y., Zgourou, E., & Greenfield, P.M., 2014).

These data lead us to additional considerations:

- The lower the age of the children in touch with these values, the higher the need for educational interventions aimed at providing them with critical thinking skills: childhood and adolescence are, indeed, the developmental phases where the construction of a *belief system* relies on several formal and informal learning environments children relate to (Bandura A., Ross D., & Ross S.A, 1963; Bandura A., 2001).

- A number of studies have shown that mass media spread typical values of the *American way of life* around children of different ethnicity, suggesting that American cultural products like cartoons, TV series, movies, music and music videos, as well as food and beverages are perceived by participants as more attractive, more interesting, higher quality, original, and cool, particularly

when compared to the local ones, which are depicted as boring, lower quality, and unrealistic (Lemish D., Drotner K., Liebes T., Maigret E., Stald G., 1998; Wasko J., Phillips M., Meehan E.R., 2001; Elias N., Lemish D. 2011; Hemelryk D.S., 2005; Lemish D., 2002; 2015; Von Feilitzen C., Carlsson U., 2002).

- A process of *social spectacularization* (Codeluppi V., 2007, 2009) has been enhanced by a cultural climate becoming ever more sensitive to the appearance and desire for fame and visibility, which has extended enough to involve children and their bodies too (Contini M., Demozzi S., 2016).

2. Living in a *showcase*: what are the implications?

In a world where every aspect of our lives can come into the spotlight and the exposure in front of an audience can provide human beings with an ontological dignity, the concept of *social spectacularization* summarizes an ongoing process that from 1700 onwards portrays the lives of people in the Western world. According to Codeluppi, showcases first appeared in the 18th century in order to give value to the merchandise in the eyes of potential buyers thanks to graphic artifices (Codeluppi V., 2007). At the same time, an "image's society" developed based on the gaze, the direct contact with goods without the merchant's intermediation, immediacy, and, last but not least, the opportunity to escape reality by immersing oneself in this dreamlike and apparently unproblematic space. From being the platform where goods could be exposed, in today's world lots of metaphorical showcases have become the stages where people can show themselves and be judged. It is important to notice how a commercial communication has caught on in the intersubjectivity: the social and psychological relationship between people is now shaped on the act of exposing oneself and looking beautiful, seductive, and confident. As claimed by Codeluppi, putting oneself in a showcase "it is not only about grandstanding, which allow the person to keep something for himself. It is an act based on the ideology of complete transparency, that is, being available to show anything in a showcase" (Codeluppi V., 2007, p.17, auth.trans.).

In spite of a cultural atmosphere that makes it looks unproblematic, living in a showcase can actually be tricky. In this regard, I am going to describe three particularly weighty areas under a pedagogical point of view: 1) the desire for fame and the idea of a "plastic" body; 2) the disappearance of privacy; and 3) the construction of knowledge (of somebody else and the surrounding world):

1. The first risk concerns the desire for visibility and body obsession. Whereas in the past Hollywood celebrities were perceived as "half human, half divine" (Morin E., 1963/1997), today's stars are extremely human (Codeluppi V., 2009). Nowadays, famous people, though always magically perfect and beautiful despite their age, tend to appear as simple and spontaneous as possible. Which means that normal people's aim to be "like them" looks easier to achieve, especially thanks to new social networks. What happens to children's bodies in this expositive process? Exposing one's body in a showcase mimics the act of selling: the body is objectified and shown while highlighting what are considered to be the best parts of it. However, whether an item for sale is specifically crafted to satisfy (and address) a custumer's desire, this should not be the case for human body and psychology, especially when it comes to children and teenagers. If people have been put behind showcases it is because they've been perceived as objects equipped with physical and psychological plasticity, required to meet the standards of celebrities, commercials that can make one feel inappropriate, and a common sense that decides what is likeable and what is not, something we can resist to through education. Furthermore, one's sense of insecurity and body shaming need particular attention during childhood and adolescence due to *peer pressure* and the associated risks (Durkin K., 1996).

2. Being in a showcase can also jeopardize our privacy. Let's try to think about the spectacularization process as part of a greater *narrative paradigm* (Fisher W., 1985; Bruner J., 1991). In this regard we can refer to one's storytelling on the Internet, described by Demozzi as the place

> […] where you can share your reality in the very same moment it is happening. [The Internet] is a place that definitely had an impact on our writing and the reasons why we write: for sharing our daily life, opening it to a wider audience, even to people we don't know, in order to show "the best part of ourselves", our "virtual self," the ones we want others to judge and see (for reasons including, but not limited to, a narcissistic gratification). (Demozzi S., 2014, p. 104, auth.trans.).

Even though one's storytelling comes with benefits, it is important not to overshare personal information or think of one's virtual self-presentation as the main trait of one's personality. Research shows that self-consciousness and coherent identity states lead emerging adults to present their real self on Facebook to a greater extent than those with a less coherent sense of the self (Michikyan M., Dennis J., & Subrahmanyam K., 2014). However, further studies focused on childhood would be necessary in order to assess whether these results can be generalized to a different developmental phase.

3. The third area I want to focus on regards the construction of knowledge, of the man on the street as well as the social scientist, that plays a role in our knowing and understanding of the surrounding world and other people around us. Considering the exposure in a showcase as a communication act – which it is in reality – reference should be made to the concepts of *transparency* (trasparenza) and *opacity* (opacità). According to Contini:

> If our being in the world is portrayed as *transparent* and public, it will be limited to the surface level appearance and our identity will be perceived in a *spectacular but deceiving* exhibition. On the other hand, the *opacity* is frightening: it can be impenetrable to our sight and seem nonsensical. Trying to shed light on it can be a long, uncomfortable, and disturbing process that requires our openness to reconsider our perceptions. (Contini M., 2002, p.60, auth.trans.)[ii]

Contini's words concern intersubjective communication: meeting another person calls for a cognitive and empathetic effort that may help us see past appearances. Which means looking at "reality" through a different lens, bravely embracing the adventure of alterity, even when it means accepting our limits and redefining what we thought to be our most accurate opinions. In this sense I find a conceptual bridge between Contini's words and two gnoseological Pirandellian categories: the *perception of the opposite* (referred to as "Comic") and the *sentiment of the opposite* ("Humor") (Pirandello L., 1908/1993). Pirandello gives the example of an old woman with poorly done makeup and gaudy clothes in an attempt to appear younger. The author noticed that the appearance of the woman didn't reflect what a respectable elderly should look like, and this "perception of the opposite" made him laugh. By focusing only on what he saw (i.e. what the old lady exposed in a showcase, the *transparency*), the author found the woman to be embarrassing. Yet, thanks to the "sentiment of the opposite" he came to understand that maybe the old woman was desperately trying to look prettier in order to keep her younger lover and mask the pain she feels for her since evaporated youth (the *opacity*). Therein lies a pivotal gnoseological and epistemological lesson: limited to the possibility of whatever knowledge, what is put in a showcase is not meant to be truly known. Believing that the way we see the world around us reflects reality it is is, in a broad sense, the common fallacy of naïve realism (Ross L., Ward, A., 1996). Thus, a dressed up, makeup-wearing, smiling and wiggling-on-her-heels little girl that wins a tiara during a child beauty pageant can definitely get a smile from the audience: because of the *transparency* of her communication,

viewers may assume she is having fun. Nonetheless, if we tried to feel the opposite of what it looks like, we could understand this is not necessarily true. The "sentiment of the opposite" can foster a positive mindset to approach a "**sentiment of childhood:**" a proactive, mindful, nonjudgmental, and curious attitude towards this phase of life and its typical romantic air of mystery.

It is additionally demonstrated that children aged seven to fifteen progressively learn to describe other people in a more articulate manner: going from outward appearance to personality traits, from general to specific, from egocentric to sociocentric thinking, and from simple to complex (Schaffer H.R., 2005). Maybe a cultural climate based on a quick and superficial impact with people and artifacts fosters a huge accumulation of information (i.e. what is offered by showcases) and little knowledge about facts and individuals? It is no coincidence that, according to Morin, the more information we gather, the less knowledge we master (Morin E., 2000; 2007). What are the risks for children? On one hand, their natural ability to embrace increasingly complex and sly thoughts could be compromised; on the other, that we adults, who are supposed to take care of them, espouse a naïve mindset that leads us to think that some children are happy just because of an ostensible wellbeing. In fact, according to Demozzi, childhood is a *speechless alterity* (Demozzi S., 2016): being in touch with children requires going beneath the surface, accepting that a child is always something more than what he/she physically looks like.

3. Childhood and multiple showcases: three examples

The Puer Optionis finds himself/herself exposed in a double way: *passively*, every time he/she is in touch with individuals, objects, images that become a role model due to their being in a showcase (e.g. cartoon characters, actors, web celebrities that communicate with children); *actively*, when he/she "performs" walking on the street or down the school hallway, singing and dancing on a stage, or posting pictures and videos of himself/herself available to a broad audience who can provide feedback on his/her performance. It is also important to remember that the latter form of exposition can be defined as "active" because the child is actually led to show face, body, and emotions (sometimes accurately masked), *but* always under the direction of someone else: narcissistic parents, judges, or, informally speaking, influenced by the desire for visibility and fame that, as stated before, is an important index of our *Zeitgeist*.

With the aim of focusing on the possibilities for the Puer Optionis to be actively exposed, three examples of particularly relevant showcases are suggested: the city, the stage, and social networking sites. The invitation made to the reader is to detect the gradual dematerialization/virtualization.

a) *The city: a showcase with agency*

[…]Finally, man is tempted to adopt the most tendentious peculiarities, that is, the specifically metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice, and preciousness. Now, the meaning of these extravagances does not at all lie in the contents of such behavior, but rather in its form of "being different", of standing out in a striking manner and thereby attracting attention. For many character types, ultimately the only means of saving for themselves some modicum of self-esteem and the sense of filling a position is indirect, through the awareness of the others. […] It needs merely to be pointed out that the metropolis is the genuine arena of this culture which outgrows all personal life. Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology, in the formations of community life, and in the visible institutions of the state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and impersonalized spirit that the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact. (Simmel G., 1903/2004, pp. 18-19)

The city has an educational impact on those who inhabit it. The urban organization, along with the presence or absence of certain spaces, areas, billboards, shopping centers, etc. has a significant power in terms of informal learning environments. According to Tramma, the urban space is both *built* as a result of human action, and already *given* because of the primordial human conditions of "being thrown" into the world (condition described by Heidegger as Throwness, *Geworfenheit)*[iii] (Tramma S., 2009). Thus, the construction of an urban space both reflects and produces culture. By adopting a systemic and complex approach to analysis, we can refer to the city as an impressive informal learning environment. In order to provide my reflection with a theoretical support I am going to use the concept of *agency* as a situated and distributed competence. According to Social Cognitive Theory, human agency is the human ability to influence and change context and events (Bandura A., 1989). This capability is absolutely essential even just to postulate an educational intervention, but it is still not typical of human beings alone. In a complex and articulated phenomenological analysis aimed at defining the co-construction of the subject and the *lifeworld-experiential world* he finds himself in, Caronia states that "not only are objects, codes, documents, laws, **architectures** produced with a specific aim, but also with sense makers. Their presence or absence in our lifeworld can make a difference. That is to say they can be conceived as *sense-makers* […] namely, agents that contribute to define the situation in spite of us" (Caronia L., 2011, p.90, auth.trans. auth.bold, auth. italic)[iv].

Urban areas, neighborhood, architectures, and design are part of the city and speak that *language of things* that "[…] helps us define what is valuable. It creates the tactile and visual clues that indicate what is precious or poor quality". (Sudjic D., 2009, p.36 auth.trans.).
Let us now think about the city of Los Angeles as an example of what I am saying. I believe the fact that thinking about that place can lead us to an implicit association between that territory and, for instance, Hollywood Boulevard or Beverly Hills and the values of fame and prosperity that are somehow part of them, make it a characteristic example of a "showcase-city." Given the rhetorical risk inherent in my words, I will refer to an in-depth qualitative-photographic research by Lauren Greenfield: *Fast Forward – Growing up in the shadow of Hollywood*' (Greenfield L., 1997/2000)[v]. Although Greenfield's work describe a reality too strong and sprawled to make generalizations, it provides a good account of what I mean here with the concepts of *agency of the city* and *spectacularization process*, as well as the effect they have on children.
"Two" types of childhood are depicted by the author: the rich children of Hollywood and Beverly Hills, dressing in designer clothes and living in huge and lavish mansions; the poor children of East L.A. whose lives are spent at the mercy of criminality, shootings, detentions, and premature death. Even though the two scenarios may seem quite different, the witty analysis of Greenfield points out that neither of them is what childhood is meant to be. Regardless of their socioeconomic status, the children studied by the author grow up too fast and an important role was played by the peculiarity of the city (more cultural than geographic) in this precocious adultization process. The media can influence everyone in a globalized world. This is particularly true in a city like Los Angeles where proximity to Hollywood amplifies the values of fame and success. Still, though, because the lives of L.A. children and adolescents are quite often portrayed in popular TV shows for children (even abroad), peer influence may be quite asymmetrical. The former plays the role of trendsetter for the latter. To this extent we may talk about a "dream within a dream:" the Hollywood Dream as a further face of the American Dream. Pictures and interviews reported in the book depict children perfectly aware of social pressure when it comes to going out: whether it is because of an exclusive pool party, or the long-awaited Prom[vi]. Talking about her photography subjects, Greenfield states:

> A striking commonality throughout was the importance of **image** and **celebrity**. As innocuously as throwing the most extravagant party or creating an individual style, as gravely as killing a member of another gang, L.A.'s kids are engaged in the age-old Hollywood pursuit of making a name for themselves. The quest for notoriety has become a rite of passage. At a time of life when young people struggle to form their identities, that struggle is raised to new heights in the context of Los Angeles and Hollywood. Whether it

is the desire to be an adult when one is a child, to be a gangster when one is privileged, to be famous when one is unknown, or to look like a model when one does not, young people are preoccupied with *becoming other than they are*. Los Angeles, in her traditional role as the city of dreams, has bequeathed the quest for the dream to her children. The self-consciousness that underlies their aspiration inevitably costs them their innocence. (Greenfield L., 2000, p.8, my bold, my italic).

Among pictures of children who work in show business with parents as their own managers, girls whose families pay for them to have plastic surgery as a present for their "sweet sixteen," and little boys with black teardrops painted under their eyes imitating gang members, talking about the *agency* of the city allows us to explain the impact that rich and beautiful as well as dangerous and rundown areas and neighborhoods can have on children. The children of Los Angeles are a good example of the set of problems that come into play with a showcase city, as well as the ones from Italian cities like Naples and Palermo or Brazilian favelas. All of these circumstances require children to play a *role* (Goffman E., 1969) often related to violence, crime, and lifestyles that have nothing to do with childhood.

b)   *"From the cradle to the stage": a showcase for little aspiring celebrities*

Beautiful and confident children, wearing makeup, modeling, singing, and dancing on a stage, with a hectic schedule full of activities and lot of beauty treatments to undergo. Children's bodies sexualized and exposed, winking at the audience in order to get a prize or a check, accompanied by narcissistic parents and personal coaches who severely stare at them during their performance, prepared to make them crawl in order to do better. A childhood spent in the spotlight is something we are used to seeing, not to feeling. For us not to be charmed by their fake smiles we need to make an intellectual and empathetic effort, which is realizing that behind that apparently happy life there are tons of stressful and anxious competitions, psychosomatic problems, draining trainings, and oppressive adults. The stage is probably the most craved showcase where an alleged gift can be shown. But the gifted child has a considerable price. It is what Alice Miller states: the gifted child is more likely to develop a *false Self* than his "average" peers (Miller A., 2008). Rather than lose the love of the attachment figures, the gifted child is willing to repress his/her true emotions, and be/act how his/her parents want him/her to. He/She is not scared to be perfect, if necessary: this may be the only way he/she (thinks he/she) has not to lose loved ones' fondness. By adopting behaviors needed by parents he/she can find himself/herself caught in a *double bind*: a paradoxical communication in which the child receives two conflicting messages and doesn't know what to do (Bateson G. et.al, 1956; Gigli A., 2007). As an example, let us think of a mother who says to her daughter who competes in beauty pageants something like: "*it is up to you to compete in pageants, but if you don't do it mommy will be very sad…*" This kind of upbringing may be very risky for a child, leading him to hide his feelings and emotions behind the façade of *grandiosity*. But, as the author states, the grandiose person relies too much on admiration from others because during his/her childhood he/she learned that his value depends on other people's positive feedback to one's performance (Miller A., 2008). This is a huge problem in the Western world of today, where, according to Demozzi, "adults want all of their children to be little champions, budding stars, breathtaking talents. This entails, as a leading trend, the spread of activities that serve no educational purpose for their being oriented towards perfection and success" (Demozzi S., 2016, p.113, auth.trans.).
I do agree with the author: individualistic and narcissistic values are not educational, and by saying so we declare that the idea of child, woman, and man we want to realize through education does not correspond with what contemporary culture describes as "successful."[vii] However, it is undeniable that from the perspective of informal education and informal learning environments' theory (Tramma S., 2009), factors like narcissism and desire for fame are educational. Namely, they produce an effect on our habits. The spectacularization of childhood is a clear demonstration of that.

Two examples, sides of the same coin and only apparently different, are worth considering: American "Child Beauty Pageants" (Friedman H.P., 2013), and Neapolitan baby "neomelodic" singers (Luzzi S., Bellino L., 2010)[viii]. Both American child beauty queens and Italian little singers are somehow pushed to the stage because of a widespread quest for visibility and the narcissistic projection of their parents over them. Comparing the American and Neapolitan phenomena is important in order to think about the common idea of fame shared by two areas, though geographically, culturally, and socially different. The American girls are dressed like little divas and wear wigs and fake eyelashes in order to get a tiara and a check (i.e. "Toddlers and Tiaras"[ix]); Neapolitan children, in turn, perform from square to square, celebrating their peers' Holy Communion or as guest stars at one's wedding. They find themselves portrayed in the *Sciué Sciué* teenage magazine, and become status symbols for fellow citizens in Naples, a city deserving further studies in order to understand how its agency support these and other forms of child abuse[x].

Both these examples rest on the potentially pathogenic parent's behavior in youth sports called *Achievement by proxy distortion* (also named *Princess by proxy* in child beauty pageants[xi]): parents may adopt a parenting style based on risky sacrifice, objectification of the child, and potential abuse. They therefore exploit the talent of their children to obtain narcissistic gratification, financial gain, and social recognition (Tofler IR, Knapp PK, Larden M., 2005). This condition is particularly harmful because it not only jeopardizes an authoritative and asymmetrical parenting style, but it also leads the adult to be more focused on the ideal child than the real one.

Furthermore, strictly related to the spectacularization of the Puer Optionis, there is another worrying phenomenon: the sexualization of childhood (Olfman S., 2008). In this regard, what is the effect for a little girl to wear a garter or a "sadomasochistic costume?" What is it like for a little boy to sing a song where he invites a peer to get undressed in order for them to have sexual intercourse? And what kinds of messages are sent to all of those children who see movies and TV shows where the higher the sex appeal of participants the stronger they are? Not only can we assume that a sociocultural context worshipping sexualization can blur if not erase the boundary between adult and children, but also that:

- Children may absorb a distorted and unhealthy idea of sex which may lead them to be sexually precocious and living experiences they are not emotionally nor physically ready to understand, sometimes to meet a standard amplified by peer pressure (Ross C., 2012);

- The adults may, as well, get used to children's bodies being sexually eye-catching and end up with finding them normal, if not interesting, regardless of an abnormal sexual behavior or "paraphilia" (Bonato I., 2016).

- We are violating the right of the child to have a gradual and healthy relationship with his/her own body now and in the future, hand in hand with a complete pubertal, cognitive, and emotional maturation. The perverse effect of "showcased" bodies is that they can overstimulate the observer up to the point where he/she is addicted to them and crave for more (Pani R., Sagliaschi S., 2013).

That being said, we can describe early sexualization of youth as a **desacralization of childhood**. With this expression – far from any religious or mystic meaning – I refer to the categories of "thinkable" and "possible" as described by Benasayag and Schmit (Benasayag M., Schmit G., 2003/2013)[xii]. According to the authors, we can define *thinkable* as something culturally accepted beyond which no act or thought is conceivable because of its "sacralization" (e.g. the human beings cannot kill each others); on the other hand, everything we can concretely do is *possible*, despite its being *thinkable* (e.g. killing a human being). Based on the historical period, what is thinkable can confine what is possible. Here is my analysis: I find the sexualization of childhood, as well as the adultization, to be an example of its desacralization. Sexualizing a child and desensitizing him to erotic contents is possible. It has already happened and it still happens. Legislating for the safeguard and legal protection of children – i.e. the UN Convention on the

Rights of the Child, 1989 – was supposed to draw the line between what was possible and thinkable, which in this context should be read as "culturally acceptable." The original intent didn't contemplate the idea of a little girl dressed up as a temptress or a boy surrounded by half-naked women: what was considered to be thinkable narrowed down the "possible." The crux of the matter here is that nowadays the sexualization and adultization of childhood is not only possible, but also thinkable. The line that separates children from adults is blurring, along with the respect and protection they should be entitled by birth. Because of this evolution, our societies regressed. And what else is the desacralization of childhood if not the forerunner, according to the authors, of the end of human society as it was already theorized by Neil Posman (Postman N., 1984) when he says that it is not possible (although in this case we should say "thinkable") for adults to survive without childhood – the same childhood that we can no longer allow to be exploited and abused to benefit ourselves?

c) Social Networking Sites as virtual showcases

The third showcase I propose is perhaps the most pervasive today. It is not a physical location, or a real stage where one can perform in front of a jury and an audience in the flesh. In the time of social networks, celebrity is something people can feel entitled to. One can share everything on social media, from pictures to live video, from music to experiences. Children and youths who navigate the Web face both risks and opportunities: from anonymity to self-disclosure, as well as sexual exploration and the construction of a virtual identity, parents and teachers need to empower children in order to promote a safe digital world and avoid the dark side of the Internet (Guan S.A., Subrahmanyam K., 2009; Subrahmanyam K., Smahel D., 2011). Today's parents, as *media moms and digital dads*, need to deal with their children's screen time, not by being afraid, but understanding pros and cons of media (Uhls Y.T., 2015).
But just like Alice who walks through the looking glass, the Puer Optionis walks through the screens on a daily basis. Violent or sexually explicit contents, as well as stereotypes and tricky advertising can have an impact on children development (Rideout V., 2015).
Social networking sites are designed for users to post photos and information that contribute to one's self-presentation, allowing to show and explore different facets of the Self, which have an impact on identity construction (Subrahmanyam K., Reich S., Waechter N., Espinoza G., 2008; Manago A.M., Graham M.B., Greenfield P.M., Salimkhan G., 2008; Subrahmanyam K., Smahel D., 2011). According to Manago,

> People can use these sites to explore who they are by posting particular images, pictures or text. […]. We're always engaging in self-presentation; we're always trying to put our best foot forward. Social networking sites take this to a whole new level. You can change what you look like, you can Photoshop your face, you can select only the pictures that show you in a perfect lighting. These websites intensify the ability to present yourself in a positive light and explore different aspects of your personality and how you present yourself. You can try on different things, possible identities, and explore in a way that is common for emerging adulthood. It becomes psychologically real. People put up something that they would like to become — not completely different from who they are but maybe a little different — and the more it gets reflected off of others, the more it may be integrated into their sense of self as they share words and photos with so many people (Manago A.M., 2008).[xiii]

Therefore, the virtual Self can overcome the limits of one's physical boundaries, presenting an idealized self-representation. But focusing too much on the way we appear to attract our thousand virtual friends' attention implicitly refers to a buyer-seller relationship. We show our embellished pictures to an audience who can provide us with positive or negative feedbacks. Research conducted by the Children's Digital Media Center at UCLA/California State University has found that not only are children aware of the exposure's power of Social Media, but also able to use it in order to reach even more than "fifteen minutes of fame" (Uhls Y.T., Greenfield P.M., 2011; Uhls, Y.T., Zgourou, E., & Greenfield, P.M., 2014).

The desire for visibility is not only strengthened by the cultural factor behind the "Generation Me" (Twenge J.M., 2006), but also an organic response. When children and teenagers see great numbers of "Likes" on their photos or peers' photos posted online the *reward circuitry* is activated, the very same circuits that activate when one eats chocolate or wins money (Sherman L.E., Payton A., Hernandez M., Greenfield P., Dapretto M., 2016). The sample of 32 teenagers ages thirteen to eighteen studied by the researchers was shown 148 pictures, 40 of which were personally sent by them. For each picture the number of "Likes" received by peers was displayed, secretly manipulated by the researcher. In the meanwhile their brain activity was analyzed using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging). The researchers found a greater activation of the Nucleus Accumbens: part of the striatum in the reward circuitry thought to be more sensitive during adolescence. In order to decide whether to "Like" a picture or not, participants were influenced by the number of "Likes" it had. This shows the power of peer influence via social media, even when it comes from strangers. Furthermore, some of the photos proposed portrayed risky behaviors (i.e. use of cigarettes, consumption of alcohol, and peers provocatively dressed). Participants were more likely to click "Like" if they received more "Likes" compared to the ones liked by fewer people. Still, the fMRI showed less activation in the brain's dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, lateral parietal cortices, and bilateral prefrontal cortices, which are areas involved in decision-making, cognitive control, and response inhibition, "weakening teen's 'be careful' filter" (Wolpert S., 2016)[xiv].

These data are particularly interesting for educational professionals and academics. The "be careful" filter, far from being a merely biological predisposition, receives its nourishment from the surrounding environment and education. The social, cultural, and cerebral effects of *this* informal learning environment definitely concerns education[xv]. It is through education that we can suggest different role models and values, less individualistic and fond of desire for visibility and fame. Still, it is through education that we can strengthen critical thinking skills that face the perils of conformity effect when it comes to risky activities or dangerous ideas. Knowing that the "Like" has an impact on the teen brain tells us something about child and adolescent self-presentation online. The quest for "Likes" may be *one* of the reasons, in terms of narcissistic gratification and virtual reinforcement, that lead to share personal contents on virtual showcases.

I shall make one final point concerning what I define as the last frontier of the child spectacularization process held by parents: the phenomenon of *Sharenting*. The terms describe the act of posting pictures of one's offspring online[xvi]. However, I define it as the act of sharing information and contents (e.g. pictures, videos, etc.) concerning both parents, parenthood, parenting beliefs, and children in every moment of their life via SNS (social networking sites). According to this definition, Sharenting is the product of "showcased" parenthood. Which is to say that not only the child's life, but also one's being a parent, is put in a showcase. It is customary nowadays to run into photos of children posted online by parents, while scrolling down the News Feed. The act of Sharenting, however, often has an early start: from the picture of a positive pregnancy test posted on social media, to the sharing of reflections and emotions one is living in this delicate and rich moment. Then, ultrasound pictures of the unborn are shared on the Internet. Lots of questions are asked about the choice of a name, baby clothes, the birth, etc. Finally, when the child is born, he suddenly develops a biological, social, and *virtual* identity. Pregnancy and the birth experience itself become a performance, often filmed to be shown in front of a widespread audience, along the same lines of some TV shows. Now, even though these are among the most touching moments one can live, it may be necessary to remark they are also normal and ordinary. Beyond social phenomena like the decline in birth rates and the growth of one-child families, putting a normal, albeit wonderful, event on as a show is a way of stressing it in order to get social recognition not from family and friends, but from the broader audience of the Internet. It is not illogical to assume that this lack of privacy may lead parents to be more focused on the "spectacular" event rather than the birth itself. The impression left is that sharing a moment online makes both the parents and the child ontologically real. If that moment doesn't end up on an SNS in the form of multimedia content, then it never really happened. But how can we be surprised of children's early use of technology if they are online before they are even born? And what are the differences between

a "stage-parent" and a "sharenting" one? Being a pageant or a Facebook little celebrity could get children used to other people's feedback and crave for more while growing up. Even though this is a hypothesis, it is always a matter of values: do we want our children to grow up thinking about fame and audience or cultivating pro-social and communitarian values? While child competitions ask for the participants to have at least a talent to show, despite being in unhealthy and wrong ways, Sharenting has no requirements. This gives the message that one is unique, special, and worth exposing just because of his/her existence.

We may wonder at this point what children think about their online presence. Scientific research and essays are still tackling this recent phenomenon and no generalization can be made. However, the results of research concerning technology use discussed by parents and children together suggests that the latter are not at ease with their pictures being shared online by their parents (Hiniker A., Schoenebeck S.Y., Kientz J.A., 2016). They find themselves exposed in front of an audience of strangers, potentially dangerous. Why post pictures and materials for which they may be eventually bullied or cyber-bullied? It is in the best interest of the child that the duty to preserve his/her own image and safety always come first, regardless of the desire for a parent to share his/her offspring's life online. Because the phenomenon of Sharenting couldn't properly be tackled in the past few lines, further research is suggested in order to reach an accurate and evidence-based understanding[xvii].

4. *The Imaginary Audience:* the evolution of a theory in the era of the Theatrical Self[xviii]

The previous pages were aimed at describing three "showcases" used to expose oneself. The following lines are intended to examine some related developmental implications in relation to how egocentrism evolves as a child grows into adolescence concerning more abstract thoughts and problems than concrete ones.
I therefore suggest a reflection about the evolution of David Elkind's *Imaginary Audience* theory (Elkind D., 1967) in the era of the Theatrical Self in an *Improvisational society* (Rifkin J., 2009). Elkind coined the term "Imaginary Audience" to describe the feeling not only of being observed from an audience that quite often doesn't even exists, but also to take account of this public by paying attention to one's image. This sensation happens to be particularly strong during pre-adolescence and adolescence. Starting from Piaget's theory of cognitive development, the author describes the egocentrism as typical of the above-quoted developmental stages claiming it is the result of the formal operational stage that, unlike the concrete operational stage, is based on abstract thoughts, which also include assumptions that "have no necessary relation to reality" (Piaget J., 1972). This means that pre-adolescents and adolescents are capable of hypothetical reasoning, but their hypothesis can also be biased, even unrealistic. During this stage "children are able to reason about things they never directly experienced. The thought is no longer dependent on real objects and events: children can handle entirely hypothetical and abstract notions" (Schaffer H.R., 2005, p.205, auth.trans.). The child can imagine circumstances where perfect strangers are interested in him. Studies on peer pressure confirm that even though the group of peers can have an important impact on impression management, sometimes children can misread the perceptions other people have about them, especially in a developmental phase where identity construction lies on the need of feedback that comes more from friends rather than family (Durkin K., 1996; Brown B.B., 2004; Monahan, K.C.,2007). According to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, the child-adolescent from about eleven to eighteen years tackles the "Identity vs. Role Confusion" psychosocial crisis (Erikson E., 1968). In this period he is supposed to develop a sense of Self as a unique individual. However, by acknowledging this uniqueness, a person may overrate or underrate himself. I find the Dunning-Kruger effect to serve as an example: a cognitive bias in which low-ability individuals overvalue their level of competence (i.e. *illusory superiority*), while the more competent ones tend to underestimate their good performances (Kruger J., Dunning D., 1999). Both circumstances are caused by a fallacy of metacognition. Metacognitive skills, as underlined by Paul Schwartz, come into play in the imaginary audience during adolescence: this remarkable and essential ability allow people to think both about their own thoughts as well as those of others.

However, according to the author, the adolescent can fail to distinguish them, assuming the opinions he thinks other people have about him are true (Schwartz P.D., Maynard A.M., Uzelac S.M., 2008)[xix]. As he states:

> Adolescents are like imaginary stage performers exaggerating the extent to which they believe others think about them, feeling each day they are going out to meet a captive audience. It is an "audience" as the adolescent feels they are the center of attention. It is "imaginary" as others are not as preoccupied with the adolescents as they believe. (Schwartz P.D., 2015)

Several studies support the Imaginary Audience theory (Adams G.R., Jones R.M., 1981; Ryan M.R., Kuczkowski R., 1994; Bell J.H., Bromnick R.D., 2003). Additionally, strictly related to the imaginary audience is the *personal fable*: another egocentric attitude that leads the subject to perceive himself as unique, remarkable, special, and deserving of other people's attention (Elkind D., 1967). The personal fable also concerns the idea of being invincible: a study conducted by Alberts, Elkind, and Ginsberg has shown a positive correlation between the personal fable and risky behaviors (e.g. driving a motorcycle without a helmet because nothing bad will ever happen to me), although this form of egocentrism peaks in children ages eleven to thirteen and is generally supposed to decrease in typical developmental conditions (Alberts A., Elkind D., Ginsberg S., 2007). It is important to stress that this feeling of grandiosity could make an adolescent feel alone and misunderstood: he/she may either snub peers or feel like he/she doesn't fit in. Egocentrism doesn't support empathy, and still empathetic and intimate relationships are needed for the personal fable to reduce. The "gaze of the other", as stated by Sartre, may be uncomfortable, yet is still required for a human being to become aware of who he/she is, building relationships and recognizing one's biases about oneself and the surrounding world (Sartre J., 1943/2014).
Once again we are faced with an interesting branch of the narrative paradigm (Fisher W., 1985; Bruner J., 1991): that which one says about himself, and that which one thinks is said of oneself by others. The idea of an audience and the opportunity to tell a version of one's life in a "showcased" society open the door to further considerations.

In the *new dramaturgical consciousness'* era described by Jeremy Rifkin as typical of an "improvisational society" (Rifkin J., 2009), to what extent can we still talk about an "imaginary" audience? Social networking sites allow users to "showcase" their lives and receive reinforcement for it. As Uhls states, "these media use extrinsic rewards; likes, comments, and views are subtle cues that offer incentives to continue your online activity. Recognition in the online world feels good. As you post pictures or status updates online, you receive encouraging affirmation from others. The carrots entice and keep us returning for more rewards" (Uhls Y.T., 2015, p.110).

In light of the above, new social media and technology development ask to shed new light on the Imaginary Audience theory and everything concerning impression management. If the core meaning of Elkind's theory and the related studies was to highlight how an adolescent can work on his self-presentation in order to impress an audience smaller than what he/she thinks (if not non-existent), in today's world being "famous", living a personal fable where we are the main character, and collecting "followers" and "haters" is absolutely possible. In a world set as a big stage, where people are actors and spectators at the same time, the concept of privacy evolves in what Rifkin names "mass intimacy": the reality show criteria applied to daily life allow very normal people to reach an audience (Rifkin J., 2009). Social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram allow users to talk to their followers live and in video. Children grow up in this culture where even his/her own parents share online photos and videos from birth. This is part of a larger scenario based on a *Tyranny of Expository Possibilities* (Cino D., 2016): the opportunity to exhibit one's life in front of a real, although virtual, audience has skyrocketed, and factors like narcissism, individualism, Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO), as well as the hectic quest for validation from virtual followers make it tyrannical.

Virtual words can actually be microcosms where concepts like the "pirandellian mask" (Pirandello L., 1926/2007), as well as the Role Theory (Goffman E., 1969) get psychologically real.

Although the Theatrical Self can foster empathetic relationships (Rifkin J., 2009), there is a risk strictly related to the imaginary audience (no longer so "imaginary" today) and personal fable: the "Celebrity Factor," a very clear example of contemporary quest for visibility (Codeluppi V., 2009) and the *Generation Me* described by Twenge (Twenge J.M., 2006).

In a world where everybody can be both an actor and a spectator with nonstop feedback, according to Vaccarini's analysis, children's, adolescents', and adults' existence is haunted by "scarce thinking" (Arendt H., 1978/2009), which is the opposite of "existential thinking"[xx] (Vaccarini I., 2014). As the author states:

> To quote Kant's philosophical terminology, the typical human being of the narcissistic era renounces thinking about the theoretical and existential doubts, because the organ needed to this purpose – the *vermunft* (reason), opposed to the *verstand* (intellect) – has atrophied. Twenge denounces the inability to transcend the pragmatic horizon of the existence, the spiritual opacity, the torpidity, basically the "symbolic desertion" and the minimalism that mark the contemporary Western world and qualify it as "narcissistic" (Vaccarini I., 2014, p.31, auth.trans.).

5. The affordances of child's body[xxi]

Before concluding, I would like to suggest one last conceptualization related to the child's body and its affordances. According to Contini, "once upon a time there was no childhood" (Contini M., Demozzi S., 2016). Even though the cultural idea of childhood did not exist, the child's body has always been there. Beaten and abused, nursed and taken care of, shown in front of an audience during a pageant or on a virtual stage, the child's body has always spoken a silent language, through its affordances.

The term "affordance" was introduced by James Gibson in 1977 (Gibsons J. 1977), then further analyzed in 1979 (Gibson J., 1979), and describes the qualities and characteristics of an object or an environment that suggest what one can do with it (e.g. one can grasp a hammer by its face, but in order to hammer a nail into a wall the affordances of that object suggest that one should grab the handle). As stated by the author:

> an important fact about the affordances of the environment is that they are, in a sense, objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental. But, actually, an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like (Gibson J.J., 1979, p.129).

Even though the relationship between an object or an environment and the child's body may not be immediately clear, I propose for the sake of understanding to see the latter as an object that provides certain opportunities for our actions. The concept of childhood lies on a set of different values, related to the historic period, the culture, the geographic area and additional factors. Regardless of the subjective value we embrace (e.g. seeing the child as a person entitled to human rights, or like cheap manpower), the child's body is always there, and its responses tell us something about its affordances. Let us see some examples…

Before a proper puberty developmental stage, the body is not ready for sexual intercourse. A little girl born in Yemen can (awfully) be seen as a bride for a 50-year-old man, and this practice can also be culturally accepted. However, if after non-consensual sexual intercourse with her groom she suffers from vaginal lacerations and hemorrhagic shock, or even dies, it is because her body did not offer the affordances for that. Still, a little girl in tears because of the pain caused by wearing fake eyelashes or undergoing a spray tan session, or whose epidermis appears irritated because of the make up is another example that the child's body has a different sensitivity than adults. Red eyes, sleep deprivation, and Vitamin D deficiency due to

excessive screen time and little to no time spent outdoors (Simoniello T., 2015) still demonstrate what the child's body affordances are, and so on.

Talking about the affordances of the child's body can be helpful in order to avoid the risks of both absolute relativism and naïve realism when we are talking about childhood.
In other words: the risk of absolute relativism is that by claiming that childhood is only a cultural concept and that one has the right to treat children according to his own culture, we are implicitly saying that not only acts of love and care, but also of violence towards children can be accepted because everything is relative and childhood risks to be everything and its opposite. On the other hand, the naïve realism comes with a high price because the idea of childhood cannot be settled once and for all, even when presented with the best of intentions. It is indeed *unrealistic* to think that there is only one kind of childhood on the face of the Earth, while the existence of *several childhoods* (Contini M., 2010) sounds more truthful.
The idea of childhood relies on values that need to be child-oriented. The child's body with its affordances can tell us something about a child's wellbeing. One can argue that I have not mentioned psychological responses. Of course we need to take them into account, but according to a certain culture, emotions may be misread or underrated. Also, children are surprisingly able to repress or modify their emotions and feelings in order to please the adults – especially loved ones, hiding their suffering (Miller A., 2008).
The affordances of a child's body can be a tool for us to develop a *sentiment of childhood*, as adults who want to take care of children.

Conclusions

This paper has described the Puer Optionis as the product of this complex sociocultural climate. But still, childhood is always more than what we perceive. And not all children of the Western world correspond to this definition. The intent of the previous pages was to go through several theoretical and empirical studies concerning children while suggesting some new terms and concepts that can hopefully be useful both for professionals and academics. As I recommend embracing a "sentiment of childhood," two ethical principles may come in handy:

"Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant I., 1785/2005)

"Reach your personal fulfillment by allowing the other to reach his own" (Bertin G.M., Contini M., 2004, auth.trans.)

According to the first one, we engage in considering humanity, children first, as our end and not only as a means to an end. This sets a good example to contribute to a different culture, more inclusive, communitarian and less narcissistic and excessively self-centered. The second principle, therefore, seems to be the logical consequence of the former. If the child is our end, then his/her wellbeing and personal fulfillment correspond to ours. Under these circumstances there is no room for narcissistic projection of adults' ambitions over children's, as long as we avoid paradoxical communication and *mindfully* listen to them, which is to say that we need to accept our children for who they are in the present moment and not for who we want them to be.
A new evolution of our Zeitgeist is needed in order for the Puer Optionis to be just a Puer, and for adults to face the developmental and educational implications that come with the "Money-Power-Success" triad.

Endnotes

[i] In this passage lies the meaning of the term "Puer Optionis". The Homo Optionis described by Beck is, indeed, *Overloaded* with social and institutional pressure (Beck U., Beck-Gernsheim E., 2005, pp.1-2), and, at the same time, *lacking* in social and communitarian support, even because of the "individualization" process and the emergence of the "Do-it-Yourself Biography." According to the author: «The do-it-yourself biography is always a "risk-biography," even a "tightrope biography", a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment. The façade of prosperity, consumption, glitter can often mask the nearby precipice. The wrong choice of career or just the wrong field, compounded by the downward spiral of private misfortune, divorce illness, the repossessed home – all this merely called back luck. Such cases bring into the open what was always secretly on the cards: the do-it-yourself biography can swiftly become the breakdown biography» (Beck U., Beck-Gernsheim E., 2005, p.3).
Of course all of these have an impact on parenting style, too (Gigli A., 2007). The adultization process leads children to assimilate lifestyles typical of grownups. By doing so they live a paradoxical condition similar to the one of the Homo Optionis. This may entail: a) an **asymmetrical** educational relationship, where the educational role of the adults (Homo Optionis) is affected by an atomistic and individualistic culture; b) a **symmetrical** educational relationship where the child (Puer Optionis), unfairly at the same level of the adults, experiences their same culture, with no filter, along with its negative aspects. Even if with his/her own characteristic, the Puer Optionis, as a representation of the postmodern child, is the product of our zeitgeist just like the Homo Optionis.

[ii] Original text: «Se il nostro essere-nel-mondo vuole caratterizzarsi all'insegna di una totale *trasparenza* vista, valutata in una dimensione di *pubblicità*, deve sottoporsi a un processo di riduzione che finisce per confinarlo sul piano di un'apparenza che rinvia solo a se stessa, mentre la nostra identità sarà esperita, dallo sguardo dell'altro, come soggettività che si consuma *nell'esibizione della spettacolarità*. D'altro canto è pur vero che l'*opaco* inquieta per i suoi coefficienti di impermeabilità che non si lasciano forzare, per il suo corrispondere in certi casi a mancanza di senso, a chiusure che respingono i nostri tentativi di interrogare la realtà e gli altri, di ricevere conferme sulle nostre autorappresentazioni». (Contini M., 2002, p.60).

[iii] According to the "Heidegger Dictionary", under the term "Throwness": «None of us is the ground of her own existence. Instead, we are thrown into the world and this thrownness is something that cannot be undone. We are thrown into the position of having to take responsibility for ourselves, to ground our respective being-in-the-world, yet we are not responsible for being in this position» (Dahistrom D.O., 2013). The intellectual work of the Italian pedagogists and academics Giovanni Maria Bertin and Mariagrazia Contini is a rich and evergreen reference in terms of how the subject can emancipate himself/herself from his/her own thrownness. (Bertin G.M., Contini M., 2004).

[iv] Original text: «Artefatti, oggetti, codici, documenti, norme, **architetture** non sono solo prodotti, non sono solo dotati di senso, essi sono anche produttori e dotatori di senso. La loro presenza o assenza in quel mondo della vita quotidiana abitato da soggetti intenzionali fa la differenza. Tali figure del mondo possono dunque essere concepite come sense makers […] ossia agenti che contribuiscono a definire la situazione nonostante noi o malgrado noi». (Caronia L., 2011, p.90).

[v] Lauren Greenfield is a famous American photographer, daughter of Patricia Greenfield, Director at Children's Digital Media Center at UCLA-California State University LA. The making of the photographic documentation went from 1992 to 1995, and was focused on the adultization process in Los Angeles. As stated by the author: «I began Fast Forward as a local story, specific to my hometown of Los Angeles. But although it's hottest closest to the flame, this body of work became about something that went beyond L.A.: the early loss of innocence in a media-saturated society and how youth is affected by culture of materialism, the culture of celebrity, and the emphasis on image». In: Greenfield L., 1997/2000, p.4).

[vi] The "Prom" (promenade dance) it the famous high school dance, generally held near the end of the fourth and final year, also known as senior year. The words of Enrique, 17, interviewed by Greenfield, are particularly weighty. Even though he was born in a rough area of Los Angeles, he wanted his PROM to be perfect by renting a limousine for a grand entrance. «[…] A limo is a sign of status, you know, that you have money. […] For that day, you want to feel that you are well to do and that you are able to get all that, even if you are not able to and you just barely get it. I spent close to six hundred dollars. I worked hard to get the money so that prom would be at least halfway decent for me. We are from a very, very low-income family. It took me about two years to raise that much for the prom. I also got a lot of help from my mom. She's a seamstress. She thought the money could have gone to better use, but she was supportive. It was worth it. It was wonderful. When they arrive announcing the King and the Queen, even though I didn't get it, I felt as though I had». (Greenfield L., ivi, pp. 92-93).

[vii] In her work, Demozzi refers to the categories of "Topical" and "Non-topical", from Giovanni Maria Bertin's theory of Pedagogical Problematicism. The "topical" is the mainstream culture typical of our zeitgeist (e.g. the "Money-Power-Success triad"), while the "non-topical" is what we should tend to through education, according to this philosophy. (Demozzi S. 2016)

[viii] A more detailed comparison of the two phenomena is available in my thesis, published in the Digital Library of the University of Bologna. Cino D. (2016). Available at: http://amslaurea.unibo.it/12097/.

ix "Toddlers and Tiaras" is an American TV show, aired in Italy as well. It films the mother-daughter dyad while competing in Child Beauty Pageants. The scenes aired are heart-wrenching: little girls in pain, crying and fed up with beauty treatments come with fellow participants wearing sexy suits and acting like adults. The mothers are generally too focused on the outcome to recognize their daughters' pain, and imitate their girls while performing on stage. It is not unusual for a verbally violent fight among mothers to be aired, swearing in front of the children. What I find to be noteworthy is that if, on one hand, showing certain scenes can be misread as a way to denounce an extremely dangerous phenomenon, on the other everything seems to be accurately set in order to boost the ratings, profiting from the little girls' discomfort. To find more information see: http://www.tlc.com/tv-shows/toddlers-tiaras/.

x "Sciué Sciué" is the Neapolitan version of the Italian teenage magazine "Cioè", focused on famous Neapolitan singers. To find more information see the documentary by Silvia Luzzi and Luca Bellino "*Baby star neomelodiche*" ("Neomelodic baby stars") (2010), at:: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eihyoo3l8Sg (part 1); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uA3cNAYGPg (part 2).

xi See: Blue A., *Princess by Proxy: When Child Beauty Pageants Aren't About the Kids*, The University of Arizona, UA News, 26/10/2012. At: https://uanews.arizona.edu/story/princess-by-proxy-when-child-beauty-pageants-aren-t-about-the-kids.

xii To prevent any misunderstanding, I am going to quote the original text: «The term "thinkable" doesn't indicate what one can think in terms of imagining […], but it describes all of the act that, according to a culture, a society, or a religion, can be accepted because they respect its foundations, being conformed or adapted to human life». (Benasayag M., Schmit G., 2014, p.92, auth.trans.).

xiii AAVV, Cdmc at UCLA, *Crfting your image for your 1,000 friends on Facebook or MySpace*, Phys, 18/11/2008. Disponibile alla pagina web: http://phys.org/news/2008-11-crafting-image-friends-facebook-myspace.html.

xiv Wolpert S. (31/5/2016). *The teenage brain on Social Media*, UCLA News. See: https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/teenage-brain-social-media.

xv To find more information about the relationship between education and neuroscience see: Contini M., Fabbri M., Manuzzi P., 2006.

xviThe term "Sharenting" seems to have appeared for the first time in The Wall Street Journal, as "oversharenting": Leckart S., *The Facebook-Free Baby, The Wall Street Journal*, 12/5/2012. According to the Collins Dictionary, the term describes "The habitual use of social media to share news, images, etc of one's children.": https://www.collinsdictionary.com/it/dizionario/inglese/sharenting. To find more information see: Davis M., Clark S.J., Singer D.C., Hale K., Matos-Moreno A., Kauffman A.D.*, Parents on social media: Likes and dislikes of sharenting*, C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health. 23 (2). March 16, 2015; Jones C., *Are You Guilty of 'Oversharenting'? Why We Owe Our Kids Online Privacy*, Time, 1/2/2013; Dell'Antonia KJ*, Don't Post About Me on Social Media, Children Say*, The New York Times, 8/3/2016; Duggan M. et al., *Parents and Social Media*, Pew Research Center, 16/7/2015.

xvii The results of an online exploratory survey on Sharenting, conducted with a sample of 349 Italian and American parents is available in the fourth chapter of my thesis: Cino D. (2016), op.cit. Thanks are due to Dr. Kaveri Subrahmanyam, Co-Director at the Children's Digital Media Center at UCLA - California State University LA for helping me with the process.

xviii The conceptual inspiration for this paragraph came from one of my meetings with Dr. Kaveri Subrahmanyam at the Children's Digital Media Center at California State University LA. A more detailed version is available in my thesis, Cino D. (2016), op.cit.

xix For more information see: Schwartz P., *Child Behavior: teens becoming self-centered,* Hudson Valley Parents, http://hvparent.com/teens-becoming-self-centered.

xx A stimulating and thriving educational response to this trend may be found in the pedagogy of "Philosophy for Children". For further information see: Demozzi S., 2016, pp. 135-140; Contini M., Demozzi S. (a cura di), 2016, pp.40-45.

xxi A more detailed version of this paragraph is available in my thesis, Cino D. (2016), op.cit.

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Author: Davide Cino. MS in Education at the University of Bologna.

Nome e cognome autore: Davide Cino. Laurea Magistrale in Pedagogia presso l'Università di Bologna.

Contacts/Contatti: davide.cino@studio.unibo.it – davide.cino92@gmail.com