The Cultural Significance of the Child Star

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I asked them:
Just what do you think I am?
Just a child, they said,
And children always become
At least one of the things
We want them to be.

They do not understand me.
I'll be a stable if I want, smelling of fresh hay,
I'll be a lost glade in which unicorns still play.
They do not realise I can fulfil any ambition.
They do not realise among them
Walks a magician.

Brian Patten, *You Can't Be That*

(From *Thawing Frozen Frogs,* Viking, 1990.
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Preface

Child star Jack Wild, the Artful Dodger, dies of cancer aged 53[1]

Poor Jack Wild. He died in March 2006 from mouth cancer after having part of his tongue and larynx removed several years earlier. His decades spent as an alcoholic and heavy smoker triggered his dreadful illness, and his excessive, chaotic lifestyle began when he became a millionaire as a teenager after his success playing the Artful Dodger in the film version of Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. As one newspaper obituary put it: '[Wild] paid the price child celebrity often brings.'[2] It is so much an accepted part of our 'common-sense,' received knowledge that child stardom is a dangerous thing that we don't even seem to question it. But I think it needs questioning. What is this 'price' child stars must pay? Why must it be paid? And what relevance does this have to the way children are perceived and treated more generally in our culture?

My curiosity about child stars arose both from my time spent teaching young children, many of whom had dreams of becoming famous, and from my long-standing academic interest in how children's identities are shaped and influenced by the media. The child star seemed to be the perfect embodiment of a child who is created and defined by the media, yet the more I tried to find out about this group the more it became apparent that they had been somewhat overlooked as a subject of sociological research. This book is an attempt to redress that omission.

There are few mysteries left in these secular, scientific times. However, for me the adage that 'the more you look at something the odder it becomes' rings true in relation to the phenomenon of the child star. It has never stopped seeming strange to me, and the more strange it seemed the more interested I became in unraveling the mystery of why, in these days of child protection and with all the well-circulated stories of child stars going off the rails in adult life, they still exist in our culture and, moreover, why child stardom is still something many children (and their parents) appear to aspire to. Following the dream of being the 'chosen' one, being lifted out of the

masses and recognised as special is often given as being the psychological pull for young 'wannabes,' as illustrated below:

> Thousands of school girls queued for hours in the hope they would be the one chosen to star in the new Harry Potter film . . . For the girls lining several London streets the chance to play [Luna Lovegood] in the new film could propel them to instant stardom.[3]

But socially the child star is a much more complex figure, generating emotive reactions and blurring the lines of distinction between childhood and adulthood, naivety and experience, and vulnerability and power. As the site of such complexity, the child star is clearly of cultural significance in our society. Just what that significance is, is explored in this book.

Acknowledgments

1   Introduction

In contemporary Western culture the term 'child star' has become synony-mous with a particularly deviant type of childhood. Images of precocious young performers, monstrous stage parents, 'lost' childhoods, and disas-trous adult lives have all become part of the way child stars are commonly perceived, thus often rendering them objects of pity, ridicule, and disdain.

Popular accounts of child stardom to date have focussed on the supposed detrimental psychological effects of early success in show business and the dysfunctional parent–child relations which allow such children to become commodities. The idea that it is parents projecting their unrealised hopes and dreams onto their offspring which creates the impetus for children to be pushed into the limelight is a common perception of the dynamic behind child stardom, as is the idea of such children being ruined by the experi-ence. In essence the story about child stars so far has been one of vulnerable children being exploited by their parents and the fickle world of entertain-ment, and then suffering psychological breakdowns, most commonly in the form of drug and alcohol addiction and eating disorders. This construc-tion of the child star as a tragic figure was most famously embodied in the 1960s film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*[1] which starred Bette Davis as a grotesque ageing one-time child performer, still dressed in baby doll clothes, trapped both by her past and by her sadomasochistic sister. This image of former child stars as figures of parody and derision continues to be reinforced in Western culture by various means. For example, the media sensationalise 'child star gone bad' stories, and former child stars appear on chat shows and television programmes recounting tales of woe in what has been described as 'the has-been-circuit.'[2]

Characterised by phrases such as 'too much too young' and 'scarred by suc-cess,' newspaper feature articles, obituaries, and interviews also work to rein-force this negative stereotype whenever a former child star dies, tries to make a comeback, or gets cast in a major film role. The message is loud and clear: the responsible parent does not even consider allowing their child to become a professional performer. Within this largely middle-class discourse, then, being a 'proper' parent involves protecting your child from the entertainment indus-try, and being a 'proper' child involves not performing for money:

> The horror stories of young actors whose childhoods end in parental estrangement, drug addiction or suicide are enough to terrify any sensible parent into giving stage and screen a wide berth. (*The Guardian*, 10 August 2001)[3]

These 'horror stories' have become part of the popular imagination, a litany of failure of promising youngsters whose demises are recounted, embellished, and exaggerated over and over again to the morbid fascination of readers, listeners, or viewers. They are the tales of 'America's least wanted' as Ryan[4] describes former child TV stars, forever hapless, inadequate individuals, children who have lost their only saving grace—their cute appeal, in a less-than-friendly adult world.

Some stories have become almost legendary, their victims eliciting as little, if not less, real compassion as the misadventures of one of their screen characters might: Judy Garland's pill-popping ruin at the hands of MGM, Margaret O'Brien being told her pet dog had just died to ensure she cried on cue, Macaulay Culkin throwing $20 bills out the window to try and entice new friends, Drew Barrymore firmly on the party scene and smoking dope at age nine, Jackie Coogan suing his mother for his fortunes as an adult, River Phoenix collapsing and dying of a drug overdose outside a Hollywood nightclub, the entire juvenile cast of *Diff'rent Strokes* being arrested for various misdemeanours and one of them dying of an overdose,[5] Lena Zavaroni starving herself to death in a desperate attempt not to grow up. The list goes on and on and is a sorry account of adult betrayal, false hopes, exploitation, and excess. Such individuals are often referred to as 'lost' in adult life; for example, 'Little Girl Lost' was the title of an interview with a thirty-four-year-old Bonnie Langford (*The Guardian*, 6 March 2000), only to be 'found' when dead, such as in the obituary of Anissa Jones: 'Child TV Star Found Dead' (*New York Daily News*, 30 August 1976), suggesting a lifetime in a wilderness of failure and rejection, with public recognition now only possible because of a tragic death.

It is interesting how the audience is never implicated in such accounts of failure and rejection, nor is the wider culture which demands child stars as a media product and then writes them off as they grow up and away from their endearing childhood selves. By centring accounts of child stardom on the individual pathology of the young performers and the adults who are supposed to be looking after them, it has become accepted that child stardom is a kind of deviance which activates the worst characteristics of children (precociousness and arrogance) and their parents (greed and ruthlessness). That the trajectory for all child performers is one of disaster and regret has also become a standard expectation for child stars, even given some research which suggests that the majority of such individuals go on to live happy and productive adult lives.[6]

This book aims both to challenge the narrow view which such reductive psychological accounts of child stardom provide by investigating the social nature of the child star and also to question why child stars have

traditionally been conceptualised in such a negative way. In order to do this I examine the way in which the category 'child star' is constructed by the media and consider the symbolic value of child stars as a culturally significant phenomenon. I wish to relocate the child star as emblematic of our fraught relationship with children at the beginning of the twenty-first century, whereby we both romanticise the image of the child and yet fear what they are going to grow into. By conceptualising child stars as both a product of the entertainment industry and a manifestation of the universal desire to see 'special' children reified and adored, I demonstrate the complex nature of the child star as a social category which is informed by influences as diverse as mythology, the media, the economy, sexual politics, and social policy.

I will show that, far from being an example of individual deviance, the child star is in fact a manifestation of much wider cultural contradictions surrounding childhood. Indeed, I argue that the way child stars are demanded and constructed in our culture is symptomatic of the complex status of the child in contemporary society who is defined as being different in all ways to the adult whilst being persistently commodified, sexualised, and thus 'adultified' in the media. Cute they may be, but the idea of a child who has become a commodity does not sit happily with accepted standards of childhood experience in our culture.

The child star therefore has to be understood in relation to the way in which children today are bound and regulated by shared normative ideals about appropriate activities, behaviour, and appearances which work to homogenise and control childhood. As Rose notes:

> The modern child has become the focus of innumerable projects that purport to safeguard it from physical, sexual or moral danger, to ensure its 'normal' development, to actively promote certain capacities of attributes such as intelligence, educability and emotional stability.[7]

Within this protectionist and aspirational concept of childhood, the 'child' functions as an index of civilisation and modernity, with those who fall outside the normative definitions being pathologised and subject to the regulating authority of institutional holders of power. For instance, the child who is not deemed to behave 'properly' at school is increasingly subject to the dictates of medicine and educational psychology, which seek to return the child to normative standards of behaviour through the administration of drugs or therapeutic intervention. The media, too, work to demonise certain versions of childhood which threaten the social order—the frequent tabloid denigration of 'wayward' teenage parents who live on benefits, for example, bears testament to this, as does the construction of traveller children as deviant.[8] In this sense then the child has come to be one of a select group of persons and phenomena which, as Rose puts it, symbolise:

a range of social anxieties concerning threats to the established order and traditional values, the decline of morality and social discipline, and the need to take firm steps in order to prevent a downward spiral into disorder.[9]

This concept of the child as symbolic of something more than itself is a key theme of this book, which investigates the cultural significance of one tiny subsection of childhood, namely, child stars. Through such an investigation I demonstrate the usefulness of exploring the status of the child star in illuminating the contradictory status of all children in our society who are both powerful symbols of hope and futurity and largely powerless subjects of adult manipulation. In this sense child stars, although viewed as very different to 'normal' children, are also an extreme embodiment of the 'child' as a conceptual entity. Thus processes of reification and subjectification which are identified in relation to child stars can be understood as micro examples of macro processes which work to subjectify all children but are generally more obscure and diluted than they are in the case of the publicly accessible child star.

The child star then is used in this study as an analytic tool with which to examine some of the tensions and power struggles which are inherent in our current construction of childhood, as well as being the subject of investigation as a distinct social category.

First, however, it is necessary to define more specifically what I mean by the term 'child star' and, as such, set the boundaries of the subject of this study.

DEFINING THE CHILD STAR

The term 'child star' is commonly understood to have been invented to describe the young performers in Hollywood films of the 1920s and 30s such as Shirley Temple, Judy Garland, and Jackie Coogan. Such stars provided the prototypes for subsequent child actors and singers although, as will become evident in subsequent chapters, the figure of the special performing child has a legacy which reaches far beyond this time and continues to the present day. Therefore, in this study 'child star' is conceptualised as a much wider category than the narrow Hollywood definition would allow in order to encompass children who have found success in the entertainment world before and since the so-called 'Child Star Era' and also to include children who have become famous through singing as well as acting.

Although the definition of child star should logically involve a neat definition of 'child' paired up with a neat definition of 'star' to create a clear and unambiguous new category, as anyone who has tried to define either will testify, no such straightforward simplicity is possible. Definitions of the child are, of course, culturally specific as are delineations as to when childhood ends and what kinds of activities and experiences are considered appropriate for those in the early stage of life. I explore the historical

antecedents of the dominant Western version of childhood in the following chapter, but for the purpose of this definition it is sufficient to say that the 'child' is understood as a person under sixteen years of age, although most child stars are in fact under twelve. The incongruity of the child star with normalised definitions of the child and childhood as they are constructed in Western society is a central theme of the book and therefore, the child stars investigated in this research all emanate from Western culture.[10]

As well as being a special kind of child, the child star is also, of course, a particular kind of star. Definitions of what a star is are nearly as slippery as definitions of what a child is due to the fact that the star is both a symbol and a commodity as well as a human being. Ellis describes a star in purely functional terms as:

> a performer in a particular medium, whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation and then feeds back into future performances.[11]

and views stars as primarily a marketing device and an 'invitation to cinema' highlighting how their appeal is diffused through media reporting which:

> plays upon the central paradox of stardom: that stars are both ordinary and glamorous, both like us and unlike us, both a person and a commodity, both real and mythical, both public and intimate.[12]

However, in his definition, Friedberg focuses on the semiotic value of the star which allows the audience to enter the fantasy of film narratives:

> The film star is . . . a particular commoditised human, routed through a system of signs with exchange value . . . the star image carries powerful cultural connotations which both exceed the fictional codes of character and identification and work to bind us into the fictional world of the film.[13]

In relation to classic Hollywood child stars such as Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, and Freddie Bartholomew, it is demonstrated in a later chapter how their definition as stars was due to the same process of establishing their 'star quality' and charisma which propelled adult stars such as Clark Gable and Rita Hayworth to popular success. However, as this book makes clear, Hollywood's child stars also had another element of appeal—namely, their power to symbolise all of the 'good' attributes of childhood such as innocence and natural wisdom. In this sense the child star of stage and screen coincided with and was informed by the heroic child of mythical adventure, thereby elevating the child star to a separate realm of existence from its adult star counterparts. Indeed, it is this construction of the child star as an entity above and beyond both 'normal' childhood and generalised definitions of stardom which render child stars a unique group to investigate.

The fact that the term 'child star' has been appropriated from its original commercial usage to denote children who were part of the Hollywood star system of the early twentieth century and has since become a common phrase to describe any and all children who achieve even a modicum of success in the entertainment world serves to complicate the definition further. For the purposes of this study then a tautological definition applies, whereby a child star is anyone who is described as such in the media (as long as their achievements are in the popular performing arts). Although such a circuitous definition appears at first insubstantial, it serves to highlight the arbitrary constructed nature of the child star and the way in which the term has come to be associated with a certain negative stereotype of the precocious, overconfident brat with pushy parents and a disastrous future ahead of them—an image created and reinforced by the media for reasons which are explored in due course.

Finally, I wish to differentiate the child stars in this study from early achievers in other fields of endeavour. The term 'child star' has become an increasingly popular shorthand way for the press to describe any and all children who do particularly well at something, thus losing some of its unique correlation with stars who perform on the stage or screen. Although 'child star' is still primarily associated with young actors and singers, then we also have young tennis players, chess champions, pianists, footballers, and mathematicians being described as 'stars.' However, interesting though investigations into such individuals would be, this book does not include these children in the central analysis although they do pop up from time to time in discussion over the nature of genius or the definitions of 'normality' in relation to childhood. This study is about child stars of the stage and screen and the significance that their very presence and the way they are categorised and conceptualised has in our culture.

Therefore, I use the term 'child star' in two different ways in this study. The first is used when describing a juvenile individual who acted or sang in a primary role in a stage or screen production. It is purely a descriptive term and is alternated with terms such as 'young performer' and 'child actor.' A child star then is a young actor or singer who has achieved some degree of fame and recognition and who is paid for his or her professional services.

The other use of the term refers to the category of child star as distinct from the material experience of any one performer and denotes the socially constructed nature of the phenomenon.

The child star is also, of course, a temporary rather than a fixed, social category despite the lifelong repercussions such a label often brings. Therefore, the collective term 'child stars' is often used in this study in a manner which necessarily disregards temporal conventions to refer to a social group connected only by their extraordinary childhood experiences, as they have passed through their child stardom at varying historical moments.

THE ANOMALOUS CHILD STAR

One of the main reasons why child stars are a particularly interesting group to investigate is their apparently anomalous status in relation to accepted, dominant tenets of contemporary Western childhood. Indeed, the question of how the child star has managed to continue to find a niche in our popular culture, given the protectionist attitude towards children which has characterised social and educational policy in the West in the last hundred years, is an intriguing one.

For example, the message about child labour is unequivocal in societies such as ours and states that children should not work, that it is morally, physically and emotionally damaging for them to do so, and that adults who do allow or encourage their children to undertake paid employment are unfit parents. The proper place for today's child is generally accepted to be in the classroom being instructed or at home being cared for, and the law in the U.K. upholds this view. Dictates on child employment state that children and young people can only work in a limited number of jobs and for a specified time until they reach the minimum school leaving date. For example, children of thirteen and fourteen may only be employed in light work, for up to five hours on any day on which they are not expected to attend school, up to a maximum of twenty-five hours each week, not including Sundays, and all children must also now obtain permits to work from the education and leisure services of their borough, which is signed by employers and parents.[14]

Although children who work in the entertainment industry are also subject to exacting rules and regulations intended to safeguard their well-being,[15] they are still regarded as a separate case from 'ordinary' children. For example, in the U.K. the entertainment industry is the only industry which is allowed to employ children under thirteen, and for which children are allowed to miss up to forty days a year of their regular education as long as they have three hours of daily tutoring on set.[16] There also seems to be evidence of a somewhat lackadaisical attitude towards regulations over the hours young performers work due to the huge financial and time pressures which surround most productions. This commonplace 'rule-bending' is recalled in the following quote from a former child actor:

> I can't remember being taken off the set because they'd gone over hours. I think a lot of chaperones are quite liberal. I remember being on set till 2 o'clock in the morning, with 6 o'clock starts.[17]

Unsurprisingly, in an adults' world, adults' rules apply.

Those who attend stage schools are also treated differently from 'normal' children, as a large part of the educational day is spent practising performance skills such as singing and dancing rather than the literacy and numeracy which most schools focus on. That success for such children is more

aligned to getting auditions and winning parts than achieving academically is a common perception which perhaps stage school owners would dispute.

The young performer is also separated from 'normal' children in other, more subtle ways. For example, in general, children are no longer expected to contribute to their family's income in Western society and yet it seems accepted that children who find success working in the entertainment industry will raise their family's standard of living through their economic activity. Furthermore, the vast majority of children are not encouraged or expected to start their careers when still receiving their formal education, and children on the whole are expected to be 'natural' and unaffected and are not required to maintain and manage a professional persona.

Against the background of our current dominant definitions of what childhood should and should not entail, then, the experience of the child star begins to stand out like a beacon as utterly incongruous with the innocent and protected space in which all other children are supposed to be growing up. For all intents and purposes, the child star appears to be an anachronism of an earlier time when the welfare of the child was not a priority and childhood as a special period of education and security was not seen as the right of all children. So why are child stars still demanded and still appearing? Presumably they are fulfilling some need, be it social, cultural, or psychological, which is not met either by children in general or by adult performers.

Therefore, the first question to be addressed in this book is '*Why do we have child stars?*' What role do they play in our culture which cannot be satisfactorily filled by other means, given the apparently treacherous experiences of those who have found fame early in life and our dedication as a society to protecting children from all possible danger and from the commercial adult world in general?

The second question relates to the way in which stories about famous child performers seem to be framed in the media in order to present an overwhelmingly negative image of the child star and the former child star. This also appears anomalous with our general encouragement and support of children who try hard and achieve something special. The pat on the back when little Tommy comes in first in a race turns into a sneer when little Tommy lands the lead role in a movie. This sentiment, when naturalised through the print media, becomes a powerful tool in creating a stigma around the child star and former child star which can blight the individual's life and career until the very end. Indeed, as one haunted former child star put it:

> The words 'child star' will be on my gravestone.[18]

The question to be asked then is '*Why are child stars and former child stars frequently ridiculed and denigrated in the media?*' I will demonstrate that this question is particularly salient because it relates to issues of management and manipulation of children and of the category 'childhood' which

resonate beyond the world of the child star and into every aspect of children's lives and experiences in our society. By outlining the way in which shared definitions of a 'normal' child have been socially constructed over the last two centuries in the next chapter, it will become clear that certain strategies of control are employed by the media in order to maintain the status quo, to reinforce certain collective values concerning childhood, and to 'keep children in their place.' Furthermore, due to their location outside of mainstream ideas and practices around raising children, I consider child stars to be a minority group in our society. Therefore, by investigating the ways in which they are marginalised and stigmatised by the media, wider processes of insidious and overt techniques of discrimination may be identified which relate to other groups which fall outside the 'norm.'

The proceeding chapters address the central questions of the study by moving from a general consideration of how childhood is constructed in Western society to a more specific analysis of how the child star is both a product of, and a challenge to, dominant shared definitions of the acceptable boundaries of childhood.

Chapter 2 examines the historical antecedents to the creation of the notion of the 'normal' child in Western culture and highlights the arbitrary nature of such a definition. The social constructivist approach to studying childhood, emanating from Ariès'[19] seminal work, is evaluated in terms of explaining the invention of the 'child' as a cultural category. Having established the dominance of a shared social definition of childhood, the child star is shown to be 'abnormal' or deviant and therefore a challenge to the ideal category of 'child.' Research about other groups of children who fall outside the dominant definition of the ideal child because they are exceptional in some way is considered in an attempt to place the child star in a social context. However, it becomes clear that even though they share a degree of common ground with other disenfranchised children, child stars inhabit a unique category due to their association with precocious sexuality and eroticised innocence—controversial elements which are often evident in their on-screen representations. The previous paucity of research in the area of child stars is noted, and the significant gap this leaves in understanding the current status of childhood in our media-saturated culture is identified.

Chapter 3 aims to contextualise our current construction of the child star as a result of social, political, economic, and artistic influences over the last two hundred years and beyond. The history of the performing child is described in reference to changing ideas about childhood and shifting cultural forms as the child star moved from street to stage to screen over the twentieth century. The way in which child stars have always been subject to adult control and manipulation and have come to be symbolic of wider issues and fears about the moral order of society are explored, and thus the child star as an enduring figure of cultural significance is established.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 consist of an empirical investigation of the status of child stars in our society through an analysis of cultural documents. The

data for this study is textual and from secondary sources and represents a wide range of writing from a variety of diverse sources such as tabloid and broadsheet press, magazines, books, and Internet news and gossip sites. The selection of material for the study was as inclusive as possible, and all articles or interviews about or relating to child stars which were collected were incorporated in the preliminary stages of analysis. Although emanating from a huge variety of diverse publications, the data comprises two main sets. The first is made up of newspaper stories *about* child stars and former child stars, and the second is made up of newspaper and magazine interviews *with* child stars and former child stars (although there is an overlap with some of the pieces falling into both categories). Much of the data is contemporary and was collected over the period September 2002 to September 2005, although using Internet searches it was also possible to collect newspaper articles from archives of British national papers from the previous five years, as well as from North American and Australian publications. There is also a substantial amount of data from newspapers and magazines from the 1880s to the 1950s which mainly takes the form of interviews with child stars or former child stars but which also includes some editorial material. The inclusion of the historical data is intended to allow a separation of themes which can be classed as consistent in the framing and presentation of child stars by the media, and those which seem to be specific to our culture at this time.

As well as the data from newspapers and magazines, autobiographies and biographies of child stars were also used as source material and were useful on two counts. Firstly, they often contained quotes from newspaper articles and reviews relating to the star in question which could then be used as part of the analysis of how the child star is constructed by the media. Secondly, they also allowed analysis both of the narrative conventions at play in stories about child stars and the pattern of techniques used by former child stars to justify and explain their experiences. In this sense the autobiographical and biographical data served to complement the newspaper and magazine articles and also allowed the exploration of a more sustained version of storytelling by the child stars themselves.

Before analysing the stories which were published in the print media it was important to recognise that, of course, as in all areas of media publication, a careful editorial selection process takes place as to what is and is not news, and so the stories about child stars in the public realm are automatically those which are the most sensationalist, shocking, or bizarre. There are plenty of child stars who have gone on to have either a successful acting career or a 'normal' life, who never became addicts, criminals, or serial divorcé(e)s and are no more newsworthy than anyone else. However, what was interesting for the purposes of this study was why the exploits of child stars are framed and structured in the ways they are and how these stories reinforce conventional normative standards of behaviour for children, and parents, with no reference to the wider responsibility of the society which has created the need for such children in the first place.

The multitude of stories and articles about child stars which appear in newspapers and magazines makes this a particularly useful source of secondary data that not only provides a tellability index as to the status of child stars now, but which can be compared and contrasted to articles from earlier publications, allowing an element of historical analysis as well.

Chapter 4 explores the data using the techniques of discourse analysis and works from the assumption that meaning is created through text. Due to the way in which stories about child stars are almost overwhelmingly denigrating, and also due to the lifelong stigma that many former child stars report feeling about their early success, this chapter focuses on the powerlessness of child stars to control the social definitions created for them in the wider culture. This powerlessness is related to the powerlessness of children more generally who are bounded and subjectified by cultural and social forces and the way in which 'child star' as a social construction works to both subjectify the members of that group and to reinforce collective normative standards about children and childhood. Concepts of transgression and stigma in relation to the child star are identified, and techniques of dealing with what Goffman[20] terms a 'spoiled identity' are considered.

Chapter 5 approaches the material from a broadly structuralist perspective in order to gain a wider understanding of why the child star occupies such a significant position in our cultural landscape, given the challenge such individuals present to our dominant definition of childhood. The aim of the chapter is to attempt to uncover and identify underlying forms and structures which may determine why there is still a need and/or desire for child stars in contemporary Western society and why they hold such symbolic significance in our culture. Using ideas from theorists including Kerenyi and Jung[21] and Leach,[22] the timeless appeal and power of the child star to elicit emotion and provide hope for the future is explored. This power of the child star is also related to the power of all children to impact on adult sensibilities. Drawing on the work of Jung[23] on archetypes and the unconscious, the idea that the child star is a modern-day expression of the 'wonder-child' motif is explored, and connections between ancient examples of that archetype, such as the Christ child, and modern day representations and descriptions of child stars are made.

The rationale behind approaching the data from two theoretical and methodological perspectives is to allow a thorough investigation of both the power and the powerlessness of the child star in contemporary Western culture. The aim is to encompass as much of the complexity of the category as possible, whilst still focussing the research on the specific characteristics of the child star.

Chapter 6 takes this idea of the child star as a significant figure in our culture further by exploring a case study of stories about the former child prodigy Charlotte Church. Through identifying the way in which media narratives about Church follow certain mythological and fairytale-like conventions, certain universal themes and features are highlighted which suggest

that the significance of the child star may go far beyond its current culturally specific construction.

Chapter 7 brings together the strands of analysis in the preceding chapters and considers the findings of the research in relation to the initial questions posed in this chapter.

The argument is made that in order to understand the current complex status of child stars in Western culture it is important to go beyond a purely social constructivist approach to researching childhood, and to draw on wider ideas pertaining to the universality of certain themes and motifs which continue to shape and inform our representations of children. The ramifications of the research findings in relation to wider contemporary issues surrounding childhood are outlined, and the techniques of media subjectification which work to stigmatise child stars are identified as relevant to future studies of other 'transgressive' children as well as minority social groups in general. The cultural significance of the child star is highlighted, and the sociological value of researching this unique group is reiterated.

The overriding aims of this study are therefore twofold:

- to provide a substantive, sociological account of the child star as it is constructed in Western culture which goes beyond a purely social constructivist reading by encompassing mythological and structuralist elements of analysis, and;
- to contribute to the current debate on the complex status of Western childhood by highlighting the contradictory demands we make on children to be both symbolically powerful and socially deferent.

The following chapter describes the historical emergence of a particular brand of 'normality' in relation to Western childhood and locates the child star as occupying a position outside the conceptual boundaries of the category.

2 The Normal Child and the Exceptional Child

In the next chapter on the Social History of Child Stars I demonstrate the malleability and tenacity of this unique band of children to be reinvented for every new phase of cultural production and to provide entertainment in whatever form is required of them by the adults who define and desire them. For such a colourful and curious troupe however, a surprising lack of academic research into their status and cultural significance has been undertaken, due in large part, I would imagine, to the inherent difficulty of conceptualising such a disparate and temporally disjointed set of individuals as a distinct social group. Although, as will be seen later in this chapter, there has been much reporting of the individual lives and experiences of such performers and also much textual analysis of film and television roles played by child actors, the consideration of the child star as a social category existing beyond the experiences of individual children has not been directly addressed. However, in order to provide a theoretical background for the rest of this study, it is important to establish the child star as a sociological and cultural construct as well as a way of describing individual juvenile performers. To this end, the following discussion brings together several strands of research, all of which have a bearing on how the category 'child star' is defined and conceptualised in our culture.

The first section of this chapter deals chronologically with literature which relates theoretically to the study of children and childhood. There is specific emphasis on the origin and naturalisation of the modern, Western concept of the 'normal' child and on the ways in which contemporary theorists have attempted to synthesise approaches to childhood studies in order to facilitate a shared understanding of the category 'child.' The aim of this section is both to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of our definition of the 'normal' child and to highlight the fears and concerns which surround those children who challenge such a definition, of which child stars are one example.

Having established that the category 'child star' derives meaning through the difference of its members to 'normal' children, I go on to explore the nature of this difference in reference to writing by and about children involved in the entertainment industry and in relation to empirical studies of

other groups of extraordinary children, such as child prodigies and geniuses. Studies pertaining to the eroticised innocence of images of childhood are then discussed in reference to the subversive association of child stars with precocious sexuality and paedophilia—a synergy which further complicates the status of this group. Finally, research into media representations of children on screen is presented as evidence of the child star's central role in reinforcing and embodying certain idealised versions of childhood.

Through the inclusion of research relating to issues such as the homogenisation of childhood, the social definition of extraordinary children, and the politics of innocence surrounding the image of the child, the aim of this chapter is to show that the child star is a figure which connects a diverse range of research in childhood studies and which can be used to investigate wider cultural processes which work to contain and exploit children and childhood more generally. Indeed, it is intended that the later analysis chapters demonstrate the usefulness of the child star as a focus for understanding the ambiguous status of childhood in our media-saturated society, as well going some way towards rectifying the paucity of research on this specific, and important, group of children.

Let us begin then by examining the history of the idea of the 'normal' child in Western society, a social construct which has been unquantifably powerful in dictating how contemporary childhood is defined and what we expect children to be and do in our culture—both on and off screen.

THE CREATION OF THE 'NORMAL' CHILD

Although the idea of studying childhood as a valid and important time of life is generally attributed to the surge in interest in this area following Ariès'[1] key work relating to the 'invention of childhood' in Europe after the Middle Ages, it is argued here that the actual roots of our theoretical approach to childhood emanate from anthropological studies from the 1920s and 30s.

For example, Benedict's[2] comparative study of child rearing in Native American and European communities identified the concept of continuities and discontinuities in cultural conditioning. Rather than simply observing differences in socialisation techniques, Benedict explored the fundamental differences in how children were conceptualised and the impact that expectations of their skills and abilities had on their behaviour. She found that the 'dominance–submission' power relation of adult–child interaction which is so entrenched and naturalised in Western culture was alien to many Native American communities who were 'especially explicit in rejecting the idea of a child's submissive or obedient behaviour.'[3] As such communities believed that the attitudes and behaviours in childhood set the pattern for the adult self and that docile obedience was not a desirable characteristic for adults, Benedict explains how independence and responsibility in young children can be encouraged so that the childhood self is on a continuum to the adult

self and not sharply demarcated from it as it is in Western cultures. To illustrate this point she gives the following example of an observed incident while sitting with a group of Papago elders in Arizona:

> The man of the house turned to his little three year-old granddaughter and asked her to close the door. The door was heavy and hard to shut. The child tried, but it did not move. Several times the grandfather repeated, 'Yes, close the door.' No-one jumped to the child's assistance. No one took the responsibility away from her. . . . It was assumed that the task would not be asked of her unless she could perform it, and, having been asked, the responsibility was hers alone just as if she were a grown woman.[4]

When compared to the discontinuity in conditioning that is the norm in Western culture, it becomes apparent that Western childhood is built on a different set of presumptions, beliefs, and ideals. The fact that our concept of a child is one of a being who is submissive to adult authority, nonresponsible, and an economically non-contributing member of the family doesn't necessarily mean the child embodies these characteristics, but that they are projected onto the child by the social world in which they live. In fact, working as a psychiatrist, Benedict went so far as to suggest that the discontinuity between childhood and adulthood could lead to severe mental distress in adulthood when behaviour which used to please others becomes inappropriate and irritating, or at least could explain the turbulence of adolescence:

> The adolescent period of Sturm und Drang with which we are so familiar becomes intelligible in terms of our discontinuous cultural institutions and dogmas rather than in terms of physiological necessity.[5]

Working at the same time, Margaret Mead[6] was studying children and childhood in Bali. She noted that in Bali, children were called 'small human beings' and that the whole of life was seen 'as a circular stage on which human beings, born small, as they grow taller, heavier, more skilled, play predetermined roles, unchanging in their main outlines, endlessly various and subject to improvisation in detail.'[7] In contrast to the Western conception of the life cycle as sequential and consisting of a series of defined stages related to various ages, it was clear that the experience of childhood in various cultures was fundamentally different and that such differences could be observed, recorded, and understood within the framework of research procedures which were acceptable at that time.

In light of such early anthropological research, Ariès' assertion that Western childhood as a separate protected space was a cultural invention seems somewhat less startling and more a logical next step from previous comparative studies such as the ones mentioned previously.

Such early studies were already challenging the idea of childhood as a universal, homogenous experience for young human beings and yet because

such findings were competing with the rising field of psychological research into child development (for example, Piaget,[8] Gesell,[9] Burt[10]) and because they were incompatible with such rigid, 'scientific' definitions of the 'normal' child, they became somewhat peripheral to central debates about childhood for the next few decades. The idea that there was certainly nothing fundamentally 'normal' or 'natural' about all children was firmly off the agenda, as the psycho-medical model of the child dominated literature throughout the 1940s and 50s. However, the discontinuity of Western childhood from adulthood as identified by such anthropologists as Benedict and Mead, and the cultural rather than biological basis of this separation, is a recurring and important theme in the Sociology of Childhood and was picked up again by the social constructivists in the 1980s. Indeed, this surge in interest in children as a diverse social group can be interpreted as a response to the somewhat reductionist approach to understanding children which had its roots in the origins of psychological classification, the implications of which are explored next.

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY—DEFINING 'NORMAL'

The pre-cursor to developmental psychology proper was intelligence testing, which was first proposed by Galton in *Hereditary Genius*[11] and was subsequently developed in the U.K. by Spearman[12] and Burt[13] and in the U.S. by Cattell[14] and Eysenck.[15] The potential dangers of such invasive psychological testing became clear when the arbitrary association of intelligence with virtue (or lack of it) was used to justify sterilisation programmes in the United States between 1900 and 1930, during which time more than 8,000 people were sterilised for activities as diverse as chicken stealing and car theft as well as for prostitution.[16] H. H. Goddard, a member of the Eugenics movement in America at that time, and a respected educationalist, ensured that the Binet-Simon test was widely used throughout schools to identify the feeble-minded and went on to publish *The Kallikak Family*[17] which clearly presented the dangers of the 'feeble-minded' reproducing themselves, and served to reinforce stereotypical ideas about certain children being born 'bad,' thus justifying their treatment as subhuman or at least as inferior members of society.

The idea that intelligence could and should be used to determine and justify the life-chances of individuals and that mental capacity was an intrinsic facet of a child which could be measured, compared against others, and which was unchanging and unchangeable into adulthood was soon poached by politicians who saw an opportunity to justify stratified educational and social systems, on the basis of scientific 'fact.' The fact that the dominant group of educationalists, scientists, and policy makers had the power to define those characteristics necessary for entry into certain social positions and educational establishments served to reinforce racist

attitudes as well as establishing concepts of normality and thus abnormality among children.

The fragility of such classifications, and the power which is inherent in the way that certain modes of seeing become taken as 'true,' has been demonstrated by poststructuralists such as Foucault[18] in relation to sexuality, criminality, and madness and later by Rose,[19] who argues that even our subjective lives are moulded and determined by social and political forces.

The power of psychological theory to shape lives could not be more clearly exemplified than by the techniques of intelligence testing which were utilised by Piaget in the 1920s. This 'ages and stages' theory of cognitive development was generated in response both to the need to categorise and control the population after World War I, and to concerns about the welfare and education of children in general. Piaget's approach to testing, assessing, and classifying children's mental and motor abilities formed the basis of the French school system and was soon adopted, with modifications, all over Europe, and indeed still underpins much of the school structure in the Western world today.[20]

Whereas the anthropological model of studying childhood had been leading towards acceptance of difference and a respect for diverse cultural traditions, in less than two decades the psycho-medical model of the child had led to the institutionalised superiority of a white, middle-class, Christian childhood above all others, which formed the basis of a particularly pervasive standardised ideal of the 'normal' child in Western culture.

The drive towards establishing normative standards of physicality and behaviour reached a peak in the post-war years in the United States when psychology was considered to hold the 'scientific' answers to questions which were previously in the domain of local, predominantly female, and therefore 'amateur' knowledge. This paved the way for respected psychologists, such as Dr Arnold Gesell, to publish generalised yet very specific statements about the 'normal' behaviour of children at different ages. For example, the following conclusions were drawn by Gesell from his study of just 50 middle-class American children in each age group:

> At two years: There is little give-and-take in play, but much physical snatch-and-grab, and kicking and pulling hair.
>
> The typical four-year-old: Quarrelsome; boasts and threatens.
>
> The typical six-year-old: Highly emotional. There is a marked disequilibrium between the child and others. Lack of integration. Tends to go to extremes; oscillates.[21]

Adjunct to such narrow definitions of how children do and should behave came much expert advice as to how best to discipline and raise one's child. One of the most influential practitioners in the 1950s and 1960s was John Bowlby,[22] who wrote of the absolutely crucial relationship of the infant

with his/her mother and attributed many psychological and behavioural problems in later childhood to the lack of a proper mother–child bond at an early age—'maternal depravation' as Bowlby termed it. By putting the responsibility for happy, healthy children squarely on the mother's shoulders, Bowlby reinforced the ideal of the closed nuclear family as the only suitable environment in which to bring up a child. The home environment was unquestionably the only way to provide children protection from the outside world. The concept of children as malleable, dependent, and vulnerable was clearly a central facet of this construction of the child and was by now informing research and policy throughout Europe and America.[23]

Although the 'classify and control' approach to social and educational policy was born out of a desire to protect and care for children, the tenets on which developmental psychology is based have been widely discredited. For example, Burman[24] objects to the way in which tools of measurement produce research objects and research subjects and draws attention to the way in which normative descriptions provided by developmental psychologists slip into naturalised prescriptions. She sees psychological investigation as reflecting a wider theme of regulation which ignores the psychological context which individuals inhabit, and views developmental psychology as constructed within social practices and with a political agenda, rather than as an independent area of enquiry. Burman, along with other theorists such as the Stainton-Rogers,[25] finds the overriding aim of developmental psychology, that is, arguably, to define the 'normal' child, as an unacceptable and pointless exercise:

> The normal child, the ideal type, distilled from the comparative scores of age-graded populations, is . . . a fiction or myth . . . It is an abstraction, a fantasy, a production of the testing apparatus that incorporates, that constructs the child, by virtue of its gaze.[26]

The Marxist educationalist Ingleby has similar concerns regarding child psychology and extends the account of the child as regulated and controlled to the moment of its birth and even before:

> I start from the belief that practically every act in relation to a child . . . reflects constraints dictated by that child's place in the political system . . . In psychology, however, this determination is not simply ignored, but the evidence about it is suppressed by the very methodology of the profession.[27]

That there is nothing neutral about science and scientific practices is now widely accepted,[28] and yet the concept of the child as passing through set stages as he or she progresses towards adulthood and of the dangers of either missing a stage, transgressing the boundaries of a given stage, or not being provided with what he or she needs at a certain stage continue to inform and characterise our understanding of childhood.

Even if we accept that there are some universal biological and psychological needs that are common to all children, Woodhead suggests that what are often taken as 'fundamental needs are actually about socially constructed, contextual needs.'[29] It was largely in response to this construction of children as passive subjects of their own socialisation, controlled and defined by adult experts, that a new field of study began to grow in the1970s and 80s which placed children in the centre of their own social world and which started to listen to the child's voice and to reconstruct childhood in terms of children's agency. It is to a consideration of how the concept of childhood as a social construction changed the way in which childhood was both understood and researched to which we now turn.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

The publication of Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood*[30] opened up a new way of theorising about childhood by challenging the very concept of there being a universal, 'natural' state for children to inhabit and experience as they grow up.

The central argument of Ariès' work (which was based on French culture but which has been generalised to encompass the rest of the Western world) is that up to and including the Middle Ages there was no concept of childhood as we think of it, and children were not perceived as being tangibly different from anyone else:

> In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle rocker, he belonged to adult society.[31]

Although Ariès doesn't give a clear reason as to why children were not treated as special or distinct at this time he does assert that such neglect most likely stemmed from a certain cultural barrenness in terms of attributing meaning to childhood and a lack of value placed on education, rather than from incompetence or incapacity on the part of adults. As he baldly explains; 'there was no place for childhood in the medieval world.'

However, theorists such as Pollock[32] and Bel Geddes[33] have challenged Ariès' thesis on the grounds of primary material such as diaries and letters which demonstrate affection and care between parents and children during the Middle Ages and before, which they claim prove that children were prized and treasured as special and different people even then. Whether

such evidence can substantiate the argument that childhood existed then or simply confirms the obvious fact that children existed then and were subject to a degree of special treatment and care due to physical necessity is debatable. What gives Ariès' thesis weight which his critics perhaps lack is the way in which his interpretation of what childhood is is located in a wider social and cultural context than simply a review of common practices within the family.

The way in which Ariès achieved this broad perspective on attitudes towards children and childhood in the Middle Ages was to look at the cultural artefacts from this period. He noted that, with the exception of the motif of the mother and child (although even the baby Jesus appeared as a small, shrunken man rather than as a rounded, cherubic figure), children were largely absent from twelfth-century art:

> Medieval art until about the twelfth century did not know childhood or did not attempt to portray it.[34]

and that this suggested wider truths about the absence of childhood as a separate, special period at that time.[35]

Ariès' work is credited with stimulating a new paradigm about childhood, which moved from biological to cultural definitions of the early period of life, and which was to form the basis of a huge body of research in the new field of Childhood Studies. Allison James describes the paradigm like this:

> that childhood and children's experiences cannot be regarded as determined simply by their biological development. Instead . . . children and young people's experiences of growing up are mediated significantly by culture, which produces a diversity, rather than a commonality of childhoods both cross-culturally and through time

and that within this paradigm;

> the term *childhood* became used as a conceptual classification open to interpretation, and thus variation, rather than a simple and unproblematic description of a universal developmental phase.[36]

Although the malleable character of childhood had already been identified by writers such as Jenks,[37] who described childhood as a state of being within cultures rather than as a 'natural' state, Hoyles,[38] who argued that childhood is a 'social convention,' and Kessen,[39] who identified the American child as a 'cultural invention,' this awareness of the socially constructed nature of childhood was made explicit in James and Prout's *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*.[40] This edited collection brought together research from a variety of disciplines which centred on the ways in which the child is a constructed subject and which rendered the child and

childhood valid topics of social, and especially ethnographical, enquiry in their own right. Historical, anthropological, and sociological strands came together in this new interdisciplinary approach to childhood which aimed to overcome the separatist thinking about the area which had characterised previous research.

Within Childhood Studies a main element of concern which has dominated the field of enquiry has been the desire to make children's voices heard and to present their experiences of constructing their own social worlds in terms of their agency. Studies such as Smith and Barker's[41] investigation into children's experiences of out-of-school care demonstrate the child-centred focus of the approach. In this study the children were involved at every stage of the research, from being consulted about suitable research methods to being asked if they agreed with the inferences drawn from content analysis of the gathered data.

This careful two-way research process works to empower children and to challenge narrow ideas of what childhood is and how it is experienced, and it ties in with another key concern of the new paradigm—that of children's rights. For example, Archard[42] argues that concepts of age-linked competence are arbitrary and that individual rights should be granted in accordance with maturity and social context. In his view the huge significance of age for children and young people as an indicator of what they should be allowed to do and when is a further example of their domination and oppression by adults and that in order to justify this, it is in the interests of the powerful group to ensure that by its very definition childhood is inferior to adulthood:

> Childhood is defined as that which lacks the capacities, skills and powers of adulthood.[43]

Such concerns as to the political nature of the boundaries placed around childhood relate to a wider set of arguments around the very definition of a child which have been debated for decades. Neil Postman,[44] writing in response to concerns about the negative influence of television on American children in the 1960s, claimed that childhood had disappeared as the necessity of learning to be literate in order to have access to the adult world had become defunct thanks to television's immediate accessibility. His fear was that children were being transported back to medieval times where the boundaries between childhood and adulthood were fluid or non-existent and where there was no educational apprenticeship to be served as a rite of passage between the two states of being. However, as Cunningham points out, Postman's 'vision of a good childhood is not one in which the essence is freedom and happiness; rather it is good behaviour, a deference to adults, and a commitment to learning skills essential for the adult world.'[45]

This idea that children need to be contained and obedient first, and happy second, reflects an underlying fear of children in Western culture

which Jenks[46] attributes to a certain concept of children as 'little savages' which originated from early-nineteenth-century ideas of the child needing to be socialised into being human rather than as being born as such. Indeed, harsh Victorian child-rearing methods can be attributed to this perceived need to break the child's will and thus allow the civilised individual to emerge. Analogies between such practices and wider social beliefs at that time relating to primitive 'savages' in faraway places are not difficult to identify.

However, Jenks does not accept the placement of the 'savage' child as purely historical, but as one of several constructions of childhood that are always alive and vying for supremacy in various cultural contexts. For example, the notion of a 'Dionysian' child, which 'rests on the assumption of an initial evil or corruption within the child,'[47] competes with the image of the 'Apollonian' child, who is 'angelic, innocent and untainted by the world.'[48]

Jenks' analysis of media stories and reports following the tragic murder of Jamie Bulger in Liverpool in 1993 by two ten-year-old boys brought to light the complicated, contradictory ideas and beliefs about childhood which make up our shared definition of the category. The main problem of classification was as follows: If children are by definition innocent then they can't be murderers, and vice versa, so what are they? The way to solve the problem was through 'conceptual eviction.' In effect, the children who committed that dreadful crime were removed from the category 'child' altogether and were referred to in the media as 'freaks,' 'monsters,' 'demons,' and such like. In order to preserve the category 'child' the transgressors were denied acceptance within it, thereby reaffirming to the public the essence of what a child is—that is; not evil, not an adult, and a symbol of hope for the future and/or nostalgia for good times past.

Jenks' analysis of media reactions to the murderers of James Bulger reaffirms the strength of the four tenets on which the dominant Western ideal of childhood is based as identified by Hockey and James in their historical account of the emergence of contemporary conceptions of childhood. They are: (a) that the child is set apart temporally as *different*, through the calculation of age; (b) that the child is deemed to have a *special nature*, determined by nature; (c) that the child is *innocent* and (d) therefore *vulnerably dependent*.[49]

However, radical theorists such as Edelman[50] consider such romantic definitions of children and childhood to not only repress other versions of childhood, but also to render the 'child' as a signifier of values which preclude any deviance from middle-class right-wing edicts of 'normality':

> The Child . . . marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism. And so, as the radical right maintains, the battle against queers is a life-and-death struggle for the future

of a Child whose ruin is pursued by feminists, queers and those who support the legal availability of abortion.[51]

That the 'child' in its current construction has such a profound status in the justification and reinforcement of a conservative social order is testament to the strength of the concept of the 'normal' child and also indicates the urgent need for the dominance of such 'normality' to be challenged.

The next section begins by reflecting on children who fall outside our constructed definition of 'normal' childhoods in one way or another due to unusual gifts, talents, or experiences, and considers research which has attempted to locate these transgressions in a cultural rather than individual context.

EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN AND CHILD STARS

In light of the preceding reflection on the strength of normative constructions of childhood, it seems reasonable to assert that child stars are not 'normal' children in our society. The very fact that they work in a professional capacity negates their dependence on adults and challenges the modern concept of the 'emotionally priceless yet economically useless child,' as identified by Zelitzer.[52] The status of child stars as children in contemporary society is also challenged by entrenched ideas about the dangers of precocity and of growing up too soon. It is not surprising then that writing about child stars tends to cast them as victims of adult greed and cruelty, in order perhaps to avoid their 'conceptual eviction' from the category of 'child' altogether.

Previously published works directly concerning child stars of the stage and screen fall into two main categories: biographies and autobiographies. The former tend to follow a 'Whatever happened to _____?' style, exposing the 'shocking' adult lives of child stars,[53] whilst the latter are usually preoccupied with telling the 'true' story of the behind-the-scenes tears which underlay the terminally cheerful performances of the tormented star.[54] The most successful of this genre was undoubtedly *Child Star: An Autobiography,* written by Shirley Temple Black[55] when she was sixty-one years old and which was on the bestseller list for months as the public greedily devoured the 'shocking details' of her seemingly perfect early life. As the back cover blurb states:

> All was not always sugar-sweet aboard the Good Ship Lollipop: she was made to perform in exploitative movies by unscrupulous studio bosses; there were numerous kidnap threats and even a murder attempt against her; she made a disastrous teenage marriage to an incorrigible womaniser. . . .

Zierold [56] also lifted the lid on many Hollywood scandals in *The Child Stars,* which reported in full the trials and tribulations of performers such

as Jackie Coogan, Judy Garland, Freddie Bartholomew, and Jackie Cooper. Putting paid to any doubt as to the detrimental effect of early stardom on young actors, Zierold quotes forlorn former child stars at length, such as Bobby Driscoll, who won an Academy award as the best child actor of 1949 and then fell into obscurity:

> I really feared people. The other kids didn't accept me . . . I tried desperately to be one of the gang. When they rejected me, I fought back, became belligerent and cocky and was afraid all the time . . . I have found that memories are not very useful. I was carried on a silver cushion and then dropped into the garbage can.[57]

Whilst the neglect of the education and well-being of many professionally performing children, particularly those who worked in Hollywood during the child star era, is incontestable, it does seem that writings about such experiences have become something of a stylised genre with a standard rags-to-riches (to rags) narrative and a cast of ghastly pushy parents and 'Faganesque' agents and directors. Indeed even children who worked in the presumably much more enlightened later decades of the twentieth century seem permanently scarred by the experience that so many were, and still are, desperate to be part of. For example, Drew Barrymore's autobiography *Little Girl Lost,*[58] written when she was just fourteen years old—also a bestseller—identifies her dysfunctional family and her drug and alcohol addiction as the cause and effect of her need to act and be the centre of attention on a film set. Similarly, Angela Darvi's *Pretty Babies*[59] describes her own and her contemporaries' experiences as child stars in the 1960s and 70s as exploitative and mercenary, even though she admits that the thrill and enjoyment of the lifestyle for those few that were successful made it worth all the stress and sacrifice—until, of course, one became too old or too big for the roles. To illustrate this point, Darvi quotes a diary entry she wrote when she was fifteen to convey the pain of being a has-been when still a child:

> I have reached an in-between stage—too old for a child, too young for an adult. Acting was my outlet, my distinctiveness from others, my joy and emotional expressiveness. Now I'm just like everybody else, and I can't bear it. I'm dying![60]

The genre of writing by or about former child stars clearly works to reinforce the dramatic and long-term impact that child stardom has on an individual's life and tends to depict becoming famous as a youngster as a dangerous experience.

Interestingly, this idea that exceptional children are destined for unhappiness is not a new one, and the child stars of the twentieth century seem to be subject to the same kinds of concerns which permeated writing two centuries

ago about the perils of pushing children into adulthood before their time. For example, the Enlightenment thinker Rousseau held strong views on the importance of ensuring children did not mature too quickly:

> Nature wants children to be children before they are men. If we deliberately pervert this order, we shall get premature fruits which are neither ripe nor well-flavoured, and which soon decay . . . childhood has ways of seeing, thinking and feeling peculiar to itself; nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways for theirs.[61]

Furthermore, in his appraisal of Victorian manuals on pedagogy and child-rearing, Kincaid[62] notes that any kind of precocity was viewed as dangerous to the future health and moral well-being of the child, and experts issued the severest of warnings to parents and educators, for example:

> Children who are prodigies in learning, music and other pursuits, are generally destroyed by premature disease in the brain.[63]

Given the prevalence of such spurious medical opinion it is no wonder the prodigious child was reviled and feared by some of the more conservative and religious sectors of Victorian society who needed to believe and have confirmed the 'naturalness' of the rightful place of the child—below and behind adults in every possible way. Kincaid argues that the Victorian distaste for the precocious child emanated from a fear of sexual precocity more than anything else, a fear which he claims is still alive today in our:

> strong even if sneaking aversion to the self-assured, knowing child, the brat.[64]

In a rare attempt to analyse current hostile public reactions to child stars, Ryan[65] explores the issue of why child stars are so often conceptualised as being cursed by their early success and why their attempts at adult careers are met with mocking disdain or indifference and their trials and tribulations with glee. The title of her book, *Former Child Stars: The Story of America's Least Wanted,* captures the irony and the tragedy of the adored child stars who grow up into mutated versions of their perfect childlike selves and become publicly reviled for their inability to stay 'cute' and 'natural.' For example, Gary Coleman, aka 'The Nation's Favourite Kid' who was the terminally tiny younger brother on the hugely popular U.S. sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes* in the 1980s, lost all hope of an adult career when the series was cancelled in 1986. Working as a security guard in 1999 he assaulted a woman who called him a 'washed-up child star' and became a national laughing stock via the publicity from the trial. His pain at not having lived up to his childhood potential and his inability to disassociate his adult self from his childhood persona has clearly become his personal cross to bear:

> I long for days where I'm not recognised. I look forward to days when I'm not recognised. But since I've been on TV in practically every . . . country in the world there's really no place that doesn't know me.[66]

Despite many accounts of child stars who have grown up to lead successful, or at least comfortable adult lives,[67] Ryan explains our fascination with stories about child stars 'gone bad' as a rather sinister way of reaffirming that we don't need them anymore, that their time has come and gone and that without us, without our support and adoration, they are nothing. Whilst there is undoubtedly an element of schadenfreude, perhaps infused with jealousy, about the way in which scandalous media stories about child stars are presented, Ryan's theory cannot account for the way such stories become powerful tools of control in naturalising certain versions of childhood and criminalising others, and also does not explain how these stories work in relation to wider power structures which define and uphold the boundaries between childhood and adulthood.

This concept of what is normal in childhood experience is clearly fundamental to the definition and creation of the category of exceptional children in general, and of child stars in particular. After all, without a benchmark of what is 'normal' how are we to know when to label someone as exceptional? However, most of the existing literature, and almost all peer-reviewed studies on gifted children, are about the academically, sporting, or musically talented rather than child actors or singers, and are located firmly within the research interests of the fields of Education and Developmental Psychology.

This body of work is enormous (much of it published in specialist journals such as *Gifted Child Quarterly*) and ranges from advising parents and professionals how to identify a child genius, to advice on how to encourage a child to be a genius, to analysis of differences between gifted and nongifted children, to longitudinal studies on the subsequent lives and careers of child prodigies, to the provision of specialised education for the gifted child and concerns over the psychological and emotional well-being of gifted children who may be 'hot-housed.'[68] Unsurprisingly, given the centrality of the nature–nurture polemic in developmental and educational research, one of the major issues of debate in the psychological literature on child prodigies is whether geniuses are made or born, and what kind of hereditary or environmental factors may influence the gifted child. Howe,[69] for example, contests the idea that 'natural' genius will flourish in any conditions and argues for the importance of intellectually stimulating home and school environments in engendering special abilities, whereas celebrated stories about child prodigies from earlier eras, including those about Mozart and Beethoven, have tended to rely on the 'genius from nowhere' explanation which explains the prodigious child's talents as a mysterious gift from the divine.[70]

Radford's *Child Prodigies and Exceptional Early Achievers,*[71] although dealing largely with the psychological causes and consequences of early

achievement and the bafflingly inconsistent adult lives of so-called child prodigies, also includes some limited sociological insights into the function and role of such children in society and places the slippery, social nature of 'genius' at the centre of his study:

> Genius shows itself as the capacity to do something much better than most other people; thus it is defined by what human beings can do. This in turn is not fixed but constantly changes as we continually change our environment.[72]

Even given the changing parameters of what is defined as exceptional talent, the key element of the gifted child seems to be the demonstration of aptitudes and abilities which are considered unusually good for a child of a particular age in comparison with other children of that age. In this sense then, child prodigies can be understood in terms of being abnormal according to the tenets of developmental psychology, with the stigma of being extraordinary deriving from the modernist urge to uniformity which characterises contemporary educational policies.

However, as Radford points out, there seems to be a much more emotional investment in the exceptional child than such a narrow scientific definition would allow, and the notion that certain, special children have supernatural powers or are 'sent' to earth to teach us something about the mysteries of life has persisted for centuries and surprisingly continues to hold currency even in our secular, scientific age. For example, Feldman's[73] study of six child prodigies concentrates more on the *why* questions about exceptional early achievers than the *hows,* and concludes that high IQ alone is not a sufficient reason to explain such 'distinctive and revealing phenomenon':

> I believe that the prodigy has something special to tell us about the psychological purpose of human development—in effect, how potential is fulfilled . . . The prodigy . . . gives us a hint about why we are here and what we are trying to make of ourselves.[74]

Furthermore, a child does not have to be extraordinary in an academic sense in order to generate this kind of reaction. Indeed as Newton[75] describes in his study of feral children, the 'savage' child who is found living at one with nature becomes at once fascinating and frightening for what he/she can tell us about what it really means to be human and the negligible robustness of what we consider to be our essential selves. Tying in fictional and true stories of feral children such as Romulus and Remus, Mowgli, Kaspar Hauser, and the Wolf-Children of Mindapore, Newton demonstrates how such narratives cross the line between art and life again and again as the protagonists become vehicles for debate about profound spiritual matters rather than being treated as actual, real people. They become, in a sense, more than simply children—a potential which all children who break through the accepted boundaries of childhood seem to possess.

From existing research then it appears that exceptional children can be exceptional in many different ways, as long as their experience somehow defies that which is considered 'normal,' and the very fact that they stand apart from the crowd seems to ignite all sorts of speculation and interest as to the implications of their wonderful 'gift.'

However, even though the child star is usually exceptional in terms of his/her talent for performance, there seems to be a certain hostility in our attitudes towards such youngsters that is not evident in public attitudes towards, for example, young chess champions, footballers, or mathematicians. This is also implicit in the notable absence of any major studies relating directly to the psychological and social characteristics of child stars, suggesting that as a focus for research they have been overlooked for some reason and are not to be taken seriously. To all intents and purposes they are invisible in the academic literature on gifted children, as if they are not real people but simply characters in the stories they act out and whose own lives become nothing more than stories themselves, to be published in biographies and autobiographies and discussed on talk shows, but never collated or analysed as documents of cultural or social importance.

Indeed, far from being irrelevant to discussions about children and childhood I conceptualise the child star as sitting at the centre of, and potentially connecting, many fields of research relating to our understanding of childhood in contemporary culture. For example, the contradictory responses of adoration and suspicion which seem to complicate and stigmatise the experience of being, or of having been, a child star can be seen as symptomatic of wider concerns about the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood which have haunted the entertainment industry since the explosion of electronic media and with it the proliferation of images of the child, in the mid-twentieth century. The following section considers how such discourses which relate to images of children, paedophilia, and the politics of childhood innocence are connected to the fraught construction of the child star in late modern society.

THE POLITICS OF INNOCENCE

In *Pictures of Innocence*[76] Higonnet reviews the changing symbolic value of the image of the child through history and sees the construction of childhood innocence as both a commercial and a social reaction to modern ideas about the family and individualism. As with Ariès, Higonnet identifies the mid-eighteenth century as a time of major transformation regarding the status and corresponding visual history of childhood. Before this time she notes that children were portrayed, in appearance and behaviour, simply as small adults, indicating their future social status, be they Kings or beggars.

The image of childhood innocence, she claims, first appeared in the work of British portrait painters such as Gainsborough, Reynolds, and Raeburn who created visual representations of a Romantic childhood[77] as commissions for the elite, which later became immensely popular as prints and adverts due to the burgeoning mass market of industrially produced illustration. In contrast to the stern-faced small adults of earlier paintings, pictures of the Romantic child told no story about future adult life, with its cherubic subjects languishing in a wholly carefree, beautiful, innocent and, of course, completely fictional, world of childhood. Such images were so successful, according to Higonnet, because they embodied the following new attitudes crucial to modern life:

- a private, nurturing middle-class nuclear family as the building block of society
- a capitalist opposition between masculine public and feminine domestic spheres
- a political belief in the innate worth of the individual which was also reflected in literature of the time, most famously in Rousseau's *Emile*

and also because of the nostalgic longings such feminised and idyllic versions of childhood engendered:

> The modern child is always the sign of a bygone era, of a past which is necessarily the past of adults, yet which, being so distinct, so sheltered, so innocent, is also inevitably a lost past, and therefore understood through the kind of memory we call nostalgia.[78]

Higonnet explains how the modern conception of the child is built on such mythic eighteenth-century values of childhood innocence and naturalism and how such images proliferated and became reinforced as the 'norm' by feminine consumer practices of buying prints of romantic children. Clearly the image of the innocent child delighted and continues to delight adults—a fact that advertising agencies have capitalised on for many years. Higonnet also considers the ubiquitous Kodak moment snapshots of happy, healthy, smiling children found in every Western household as modern-day reflections of the qualities embodied in paintings of Romantic children. In effect, she argues, we take the shots which fulfil our expectations of what childhood should be, and the image of the child invented in eighteenth-century Romantic art has become the standardised norm and inherited ideal on which we base our own visual culture.

Higonnet observes that the way in which images of Romantic children firmly differentiate the child from the adult and place them in a separate, wonderful, mythical world of childhood creates a desire for the child and for childhood based on the innocence which is portrayed. Romantic children do not 'know' adults and are also unconscious of adult desires, rendering it possible for adults to project whatever they need and want to see onto the image of the child.

However, Higonnet claims that the last decade has seen new images of children appearing in the media which are much more physical and challenging than the Romantic ones and which portray in children a certain knowingness of their 'innocent' appeal. Controversial pictures of children smoking cigarettes and posing provocatively, such as in the work of Sally Mann,[79] flaunt the very sexual innocence that was at the core of the Romantic child ideal; and, to a lesser degree of controversy but with a higher degree of exposure, many advertising campaigns and popular images seem to hinge on the sexual appeal of children. Higonnet concludes her study by identifying the legacy that the cult of childhood innocence has left us with and voices her concerns about the consequences to the child when that innocence is exploited and inverted as a slick marketing ploy:

> The image of childhood created in the 18th Century has run its course, and is now being replaced by another way of picturing childhood . . . The image of childhood innocence is now in jeopardy not just because it is being violated, but because it was seriously flawed all along . . . innocence turns out to be highly susceptible to commercialisation. The ideal of the child as object of adoration has turned all too easily into the concept of the child as object, and then into the marketing of the child as commodity.[80]

In contrast to Higonnet's view that cultural representations of children have transcended into new territories, Warner[81] considers that the nostalgic worship of childhood innocence is more marked today than it has ever been because of our 'nagging, yearning desire to work back to a pristine state of goodness.' Warner explains how the difference between the child and the adult has become a dominant theme in contemporary mythology due to children's 'observable, active fantasy life, their fluid make believe play,' and their supposed preternatural wisdom. In effect, she argues that children provide us with certain sentiments and feelings of hopefulness which we can't find elsewhere and which we desperately need in an increasingly commercialised, fragmented, and secular society. However, she warns that the consecration of childhood to such an extent renders ordinary children failures because they can't live up to such exacting standards:

> Children aren't separate from adults . . . they can't live innocent lives on behalf of adults . . . Nor can individuals who happen to be young act as the living embodiments of adults' inner goodness, however much adults may wish it . . . Children are our copy, in little: in Pol Pot's Cambodia they'll denounce their own families; in affluent cities of the West, they'll wail for expensive trainers with the right label like their friend's.[82]

Warner warns how the reification of childhood purity and innocence in our culture paradoxically puts children more at risk of sexual abuse and

exploitation because, as she so aptly describes it; 'pornography clusters to the sacred and the forbidden like wasps' nests in chimneys.'[83]

Kincaid[84] also views the artificial separation of children from adults as central to the eroticisation of children in our culture. He explains how divisions between adults and children are built on binary distinctions such as innocence and experience, ignorance and knowledge, and incapacity and competence, arbitrary divisions which all derive strength from the culturally defined sexual differences between the two groups:

> the division between adult and child . . . has been for at least the last two hundred years heavily eroticised: the child is that species which is free of sexual feeling or response; the adult is that species which has crossed over into sexuality. The definitional base is erotic and our discourse insists on it by loudly denying its importance.[85]

Kincaid considers that without such a disassociation our position and identity as adults is seriously threatened and thus we continue to turn a blind eye to the way in which our culture eroticises children, preferring instead to vilify paedophiles as 'evil monsters,' thus turning attention away from complex issues which challenge our family structure and social system at large. Kincaid argues that paedophilia is a necessary cultural position conjured up as the perverted 'other' against which 'we' can judge ourselves as 'normal.' The paedophile then is the logical extension of our child-loving culture which not only presents innocent and pure qualities as being embodied in the child, but also forbids desiring the child sexually:

> The child has been made desirable, and we must blame someone, namely the paedophile, as much a necessary cultural construction as a real-life criminal.[86]

Kincaid draws attention to the huge amount of chattering about paedophiles and paedophilia in newspapers, magazines, novels, TV dramas, films, and news programmes which, he claims, suggests an obsession with child-love about which there is only one acceptable opinion—it is evil, and its perpetrators are heinous. Whilst in no way condoning the activities of paedophiles, Kincaid makes an important point here about why it is that the power structures between children and adults which are inherent in our society create the need for certain images of children as naïve, innocent and cute on one hand and why we seem to have an insatiable desire for information about abused, abducted, and mistreated children on the other. With such uncomfortable contradictions in our cultural and psychological relationship with children it is little wonder we feel the need to shift all blame and responsibility onto a few monsters from whom our children need to be protected.

Giroux[87] also questions the helpfulness of locating the site of child sexual abuse within the realms of a marginalised minority of 'evil perverts' rather than looking more carefully at our culture in general and at our projections

onto and representations of children in particular. In reference to the popularity of child beauty pageants in the United States he highlights the growing tendency to conflate childlike beauty with adult beauty. Giroux suggests that to hold children up as objects of desire and then castigate those who respond sexually to that stimulus places responsibility for abuse firmly with the perpetrator without also sharing that responsibility among all who are involved in creating, reproducing, or enjoying images which present children as innocently beautiful. Giroux considers the myth of childhood innocence to be disempowering and dangerous to children as it:

> not only erases the complexities of childhood . . . but it also offers an excuse for adults to evade responsibility for how children are firmly connected to and shaped by the social and cultural institutions run largely by adults. Innocence in this instance makes children invisible except as projections of adult fantasies.[88]

This idea of the child as a blank canvas or empty vessel, powerless in the face of adult control, is central to Kincaid's extreme constructivist understanding of the 'child' as a mere textual category which can be filled with or assigned any meaning which suits adult society and sentiments at the time. In such a figuration then, the child:

> is not, in itself, anything but a cultural formation and an object of adult desire, a function necessary to our psychic and cultural life.[89]

Given the potential emptiness of the category 'child,' it becomes fascinating to see what kind of appearances, behaviours, and qualities children are imbued with in popular cultural products such as TV programmes, films, and advertising campaigns, as such representations may be extremely telling as to our collective definition of the meanings which we ascribe to childhood and children. Indeed the child on stage or screen is surely the emptiest of them all, consisting entirely of adult design and speaking only the words put into its mouth by adults.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDREN

Studies on representations of children in the visual media suggest that the 'real' child sitting at home as part of the audience and the 'ideal' child whose image is projected on screen, although conceptually linked, are poles apart. Research in this area demonstrates that the manipulation of the image of the child in the media appears to be both predictably mercenary, in that there is little concern for the actual experiences of, or consequences to, 'real' children, and surprisingly uniform, as children tend to be used to fulfil the same kind of emotional and psychosocial needs in various cultures.

For example, Walkerdine[90] studied portrayals of little girls in a variety of media in Britain and the United States in certain periods of history. She found that not only did characters such as Little Orphan Annie fulfil adult fantasies about the self-made underdog achieving the American dream, but that the qualities ascribed to Annie were 'deeply resistant to the normative model of the child.'[91] Instead of embodying traditional female qualities such as gentleness, vulnerability, and domesticity, Annie was essentially a child with the mind of an adult, rough round the edges, smart and savvy, tough with a big heart, totally without family, education, or social status and yet utterly incorruptible. In answer to her question as to the social and psychological conditions which produced Little Orphan Annie, Walkerdine concludes that the emotional appeal of the character lies in her autonomy and moral strength and that she is:

> The apotheosis of a particular version of American-ness, the one which takes immigrants and children of immigrants who may no longer know their own histories, but who can create their life opportunities through guts and hard work even in the toughest of situations.[92]

Marchand in his study of the role of children in the still advertisements which appeared in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s also found that the image of the child can be used to reaffirm desirable social attitudes:

> Of the supporting actors and actresses in the social tableaux, few were more stereotyped than the children. Two children invariably meant a boy and a girl, never two girls or two boys. Virtually never were children described or depicted in such a way as to suggest distinctly individual personalities. Except when the selling message specifically dictated otherwise, children were healthy, fastidiously groomed and attired and impeccable in behaviour.[93]

Unsurprisingly, as Marchand points out, these scenes depicting the family circle had more to do with the public's need for a sense of stability and security in a rapidly changing society than with the social reality of childhood or family life:

> In an age of anxieties about family relationships and centrifugal social forces, this visual cliché was no social mirror; rather it was a reassuring pictorial convention.[94]

That images of children are laden with social significance is also recognised by Wolfenstein[95] in her analysis of the image of the child in film and literature. Through comparing representations of children from several European countries and the United States she concludes that specific cultural ideals are reflected in child characters:

> Children as they appear in art, literature, drama or films embody a complex mixture of fantasy and reality. They represent memories and dreams of adults about their own lost childhoods, as well as feelings about those mysterious beings, their own children.[96]

For example, Huckleberry Finn expresses an American ideal of the 'good, strong, self-sufficient child' who is resourceful and independent, whereas Dickens' Oliver Twist represents a noble if vulnerable and weak child in need of protection and gentleness which, Wolfenstein suggests, corresponds to a major theme in British culture—that of the worthiness of the adult in comparison to the pure nature of the child. In Italian literature and film there is a recurring image of the child as a saviour, reflecting strong associations between the redemptive power of the Christ-child and the potential of all children to bear the cross of mankind and show adults the power of love, whereas in French films the sad and yearning child whose dreams of love are bound to be disappointed stands in contrast to the adult characters who already know this disappointment but are given renewed hope through contact with the naïve child.

However, even given the differences in nuance in the representations of children in these cultures due to varying religious, literary, and historical traditions, Wolfenstein identifies a common thread in the portrayals:

> Children in the films of the four cultures considered here all have something in common. They are noble characters, usually nobler than the adults around them . . . in one way or another, they represent moral demands and ideals.[97]

Kenway and Bullen [98] have also found that certain stock images of children as embodiments of fundamental values and purity abound in popular culture. They explain that, as typified in the *Home Alone*[99] movies, the particular niche which children occupy in film and TV shows is often one of the quick-witted, wise, and moral child who easily outwits irresponsible, foolish, or immoral adults, thus exposing the artifice and/or corruption of the social order. This role of the child as clever and good in contrast to the greedy or wicked adult is a staple of fairy tales and classic literature and reinforces ideals about the innocent wisdom of childhood and the inherent differences between children and adults.

Ironically, however, as Kenway and Bullen describe, changes in the ways contemporary childhood is marketed, experienced, and consumed mean that differences between child and adult culture may now be much less tangible than in the past. They point out that the image of the child as selfless, honest, and morally above adults:

> is not always the case in the particular world of children's consumer culture of which the *Home Alone* films are representative. Young people today are

offered identities as pleasure-seeking, self-indulgent, autonomous, rational decision makers. They are more often precocious than innocent.[100]

The idea that the very cultural images which reinforced the constructed differences between children and adults and helped perpetuate the cult of childhood innocence may now be responsible for its collapse is taken up by Kinder.[101] In her analysis of American televisual culture, Kinder describes the way in which the illusory empowerment of the precocious child and the infantilised adult is reflected in consumerist culture which works to encourage children to illicitly indulge in adult culture and to provide the means for adults to retain their youth by both keeping up with pop culture's latest fads and by buying into products which evoke a sense of nostalgia about lost childhoods. In a similar vein to Postman's argument about the disappearance of childhood referred to earlier in this chapter, Meyrowitz[102] has also identified this blurring of the states of childhood and adulthood as a consequence of the electronic media which demystifies adult authority and wisdom and provides children with adult knowledge. He claims that as a result both adult and child roles shift towards a 'middle-region, all-age role.'

Kenway and Bullen agree that childhood is changing and that we are entering a new stage in the construction and reconstruction of childhood and youth as the demarcation between education, entertainment, and advertising collapse and transgenerational boundaries blur and shift:

> consumer-media culture in its various forms has transformed the lives of children, the institutions of the family and the school and, ultimately, the 'nature' of childhood.[103]

Although Kenway and Bullen's theory that the young are no longer constructed simply as sites for adult pleasure but as powerful and knowing consumers themselves seems to describe current social changes on one level, it could be argued that it underestimates the strength of the myth of childhood innocence which is inherent in the cultural and political institutions of our society and which is blatantly manifested in representations of children in the media. Indeed, as Kincaid's analysis of media images of children demonstrates, the form children take in popular culture is startlingly homogenous and blatantly erotic, with icons of childhood generally being, 'big-eyed, kissy-lipped blonde figures.' He notes that Jackie Coogan, Shirley Temple, Ricky Schroeder, Drew Barrymore, River Phoenix, and Macaulay Culkin all epitomised this Western version of the idealised child, with the white skin/blonde hair combination signifying the ultimate in innocence. Kincaid argues that by highlighting the very aspects of children which appeal to paedophiles (such as their purity and 'beautifully empty' look) this recurring image of the child in popular culture clearly fulfils erotic longings for the child which are largely unremarked upon. Kincaid documents how the eroticisation of certain body parts of such children,

the bottom in particular, is included in many films which have gratuitous swimming, bathing, or undressing-for-bed scenes as well as scenes of spankings or beatings:

> the image of the cute, huggable, beatable child is likely so powerful that we not only cannot do without it but cannot even recognise our own need. It has become second nature, this desire . . . in our minds and in our art and in our lives. When somebody brings it to our attention therefore, it seems absurd.[104]

In his analysis of the appeal of Shirley Temple in the 1920s and 1930s, Wood[105] also describes as peculiar the way in which a tiny child imbued with qualities of both sensual precociousness and childish naïveté in her film roles was considered utterly acceptable to the movie-going public. In the infamous *Baby Burlesques,*[106] three-year-old Temple stood in her panties winking, smiling, and shaking her shoulders, and at the age of five she played a professional seductress dressed in black lace lingerie in *Pollytix in Washington.*[107] Embodying wifely virtues of devotion, affection, generosity, and vulnerability, Woods argues that Temple became the ultimate feminised movie star, rescued from poverty by handsome sugar daddies in her films time and again and yet innocent enough to be totally unthreatening:

> Temple's popularity was a distinct backlash against the gold-diggers played by Mae West and Jean Harlow . . . Such women were too intimidating to the conservative, upper-middle-class male, so Temple stepped in, a stunted figure of feminine sexuality in an era of economy and restriction.[108]

This use of the performing child to represent that which is missing or lost in adult society has also been recorded in a quite different social context by Steedman[109] in her study of child acrobats and actors in Victorian England. According to Steedman, the individual and personal history that a child embodied came to be used to represent human interiority and the unconscious in this period. The 'strange dislocations' of the child acrobat performing in public spaces drew attention to debates around the proper treatment of children in much the same way as chimney sweeps and factory children did. However, the fact that the acrobats were performing for the pleasure of adults complicated such sentiments. The pity felt at seeing children perform contortions for an audience and the desire of the audience to see such performances is identified by Steedman as illustrative of the inherent paradox of childhood which has so complicated the relationship between adults and children since the eighteenth century:

> children were *both* the repositories of adults' desires . . . *and* social beings, who lived in social worlds and networks of social and economic relationships, as well as in the adult imagination.[110]

This duality of childhood as both a lived experience and an idea to be used by adults to fulfil deep-seated longings seems as relevant to today's child stars as it did to the little acrobats of Victorian London. Indeed, as Steedman observes, the performing child has long had, and probably will always have, profound meanings projected onto it:

> The search is for the self, and the past that is lost and gone; and . . . since the end of the 18th century, the lost object has come to assume the shape and form of a child.[111]

SUMMARY

This chapter has explained how our concept of the 'normal' child has been built upon a conceptual and material separation of adults and children over the last two hundred years, and how the ideal of childhood innocence has been and continues to be central to this division. The implications of this arbitrary separation to those children who fall outside the socially constructed boundaries of childhood by being exceptional in some way have been examined, and related research concerning the sexualisation and commercialisation of the image of the child has been reviewed. By focussing on a cross section of research on gifted and precociously able children, paedophilia, consumerism, and media representations of children it has been shown that a multitude of competing discourses underpin our current construction of the category 'child star.' This complex range of influences renders such individuals objects of concern, desire, revulsion, fascination, envy, or pity depending on the angle of the lens through which we gaze at them, and I have shown that it is this very 'emptiness' to represent whatever is required by their audience that most comprehensively determines and defines the child star.

The child star has been contextualised within existing theoretical understandings of 'normal' and 'extraordinary' children, and the way in which the child star derives its meaning and cultural significance from being both different from 'normal' children and different from other 'extraordinary' children, such as academic geniuses and feral children, has been described.

The next chapter considers the contemporary child star as a product of both its own genealogy and wider changes in ideas about childhood, fame, and entertainment and demonstrates the universality and cultural specificity of young performers. It also provides a useful guide to the main figures in the child star hall of fame.

3 A Social History of Child Stars

The previous chapter identified child stars as abnormal in relation to the constructed ideal tenets of Western childhood due both to their unusual childhood experiences and to their association with precocious sexuality and the commercialisation of childhood. This chapter explores the specific history of the child star in more detail by tracing the social, cultural, and economic influences which contributed to the emergence of the group as a distinct and culturally significant phenomenon in the twentieth century. As it would be beyond the scope of this chapter, and indeed the book, to include reference to every child who has performed in a professional capacity on stage or screen, what follows is a selective cross-section of child stars, including the most famous (or infamous) from each era.

Although the child star in our modern understanding of the term was a product of the wider Hollywood star system in the 1920s and 30s, the concept of certain children as deserving recognition and adoration is an ancient and universal one. Indeed, one could argue that in Western culture at least, the Christ child was the very first child star. Certainly the overwhelming popularity of the 'Virgin and Child' and the 'Adoration of the Kings' as artistic subject matter from the twelfth century onwards pays testament to the fundamental importance and endurance of the image of the reified, beautiful child as a symbol of preternatural wisdom and redemption.[1]

The association of the purity and hope represented by the baby Jesus with the adorable child performer was one which Hollywood clearly seized upon with their troop of angelic starlets such as Shirley Temple and Jackie Coogan. The impact of mythical and symbolic influences on the creation and recreation of the child star is explored in depth in a later chapter which examines the universal significance of the 'wonder-child' archetype. For the present however, this chapter is concerned with the material rather than figurative antecedents of today's child stars, namely the child actors and performers who have recurred, with varying degrees of success and recognition, since antiquity. Whilst a comprehensive account of all recorded instances of child performers throughout history is beyond the scope of this study, what follows is a series of snapshots of key periods when child performers became

particularly visible or important, often due to changes in modes of cultural production or public demand.

The metamorphosis of the child performer into the child star is shown to be a process involving a gradual shift in emphasis from what a child can do as well as an adult can, to what a child can do which encapsulates the romantic ideal of that which is charming and 'childlike.' That this shift from the functional to the allegorical coincided with wider changes in the status of children over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries illustrates both the socially constructed nature of the child star and the usefulness of analysing attitudes towards child performers in order to gauge broader opinions about childhood in general.

Through the following reflection on the status of child stars past and present I demonstrate the extent to which the performing child has never been a neutral category, and how attitudes towards children in general, the theatre in particular, and wider economic, religious, and social issues have all played a part in their construction and reconstruction over time. The culmination of this has been the modern image of the child star, a cultural stereotype which has become enshrined in the collective consciousness as a peculiar mix of precocious talent, synthetic charm, and unhappy misfortune.

EARLY CHILD ACTORS

Putting aside the myriad forgotten and unrecorded amateur child street performers who have doubtless danced, tumbled, and begged their way through all the marketplaces of history, the first tenuous evidence of children performing professionally on stage comes from ancient Greece. Griffiths[2] claims, from a textual analysis of Greek extant tragedy, that child parts were cued in differently and more explicitly than adult parts and concludes, somewhat inconclusively, that child characters were indeed played by child actors, although the social status and biographies of such individuals can only be speculated upon.

It is not until Elizabethan England that child actors are well documented both on and off stage,[3] when young boys played the parts of women and sometimes old men, as well as children, in Shakespearian plays. Several of Shakespeare's plays capitalise on the effect of boys acting women, who then take on disguise as boys, and the use of child actors was an intrinsic part of such productions as women were not allowed to appear on stage at that time. The Puritans, needless to say, disapproved of the theatre in general and were particularly scandalized by boys cross-dressing as women. However, regardless of religious indignation, the young actors proved so popular that two whole acting companies were created in London with solely child performers—the Children of the Chapel Royal and the Paul's Boys. These boys' companies consisted of eight to twelve boys of various ages and types, some of whom seemed to have been pressed into service against their will due to

their appealing looks and voices. There is evidence even from this time that certain child actors had 'star' quality and were lauded for their individual talents. In 1603 Ben Jonson wrote a moving epitaph of one such actor, Solomon Pavy, who had performed in many of his plays. Pavy was pressed into service in 1600 at the age of 10 and died three years later. Jonson's moving epitaph suggests that the child acted old age too well and laments the cruelty of fate in taking him so young:

> *Years he numbered scarce thirteen*
> *When fates turn'd cruel,*
> *Yet three fill'd zodiacs had he been*
> *The stage's jewel:*
> *And did act, what now we moan, Old men so duly,*
> *As, sooth, the Parcae [the three Fates] thought him one,*
> *He play'd so truly* [4]

The boys' companies gradually fell out of favour as they were involved in various scandals in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, culminating in a disastrous performance of *Eastward Ho* by Jonson, Marston, and Chapman in 1605 by the Children of the Chapel. The play contained a passage about Scots which offended King James so much that the Children lost their royal patronage and the authors were briefly imprisoned. Apart from a short resurgence of interest with the Beeston's Boys company from1637–42, the time of the children's companies was over—stage children of later periods would never have such a respected status again.

   The shift from the use of children as actors to freshen up ensemble pieces to the idea of a particular child as being worthy of special attention seemed to arise from the realisation of the potential entertainment and fiscal value of an individual child who was in some way extraordinary. This revelation came in the form of the eighteenth century musical prodigy, the most famous of this impressive and precociously talented group being Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) who began to play the harpsichord at three and who at five composed an 'Andante and Allegro,' giving his first public performance at that age to gasps of wonderment. In the next century it was Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47) who most impressed, giving his first concert as a professional pianist at nine and composing 'truly remarkable' pieces at the ages of ten and eleven.[5] Others in this illustrious category included Paganini, Liszt, and Beethoven, although the link between 'natural genius' and wealthy and indulgent parents has yet to be explained psychologically. The popularity and peculiarity of such child prodigies is apparent from the following excerpt of a letter to the Royal Society of Music describing an eyewitness account of one of Mozart's early performances:

> If I was to send you a well attested account of a boy who measured seven feet in height, when he was no more than eight years of age, it might be considered

as not undeserving the notice of the Royal Society. The instance which I now desire you will communicate to that learned body, of as early an exertion of most extraordinary musical talents, seems perhaps equally to claim their attention . . . I carried to [Mozart] a manuscript duet, which was composed by an English gentleman to some favourite words in Metastasio's opera of Demofoonte. My intention in carrying with me this manuscript composition was to have an irrefragable proof of his abilities, as a player at sight, it being absolutely impossible that he could have ever seen the music before. The score was no sooner put upon his desk, than he began to play the symphony in a most masterly manner, as well as in the time and stile which corresponded with the intention of the composer. I mention this circumstance, because the greatest masters often fail in these particulars on the first trial . . . His extemporary compositions also, of which I was a witness, prove his genius and invention to have been most astonishing. . . . (Daines Barrington, 1769)[6]

There was evidently a place for prodigious children in popular entertainment, and the excitement of discovering or identifying young wonders is palpable in this piece. The way in which Mozart is described as a 'genius,' 'astonishing,' and 'extraordinary' clearly put him on a different plane to 'normal' children, and such dramatic language set the tone for the construction of the Victorian infant phenomenon.

THE INFANT PHENOMENON

Clearly, the public's appetite for remarkable children had been identified, and it was arguably the musical prodigies of the eighteenth century who paved the way for the explosion of all manner of child performers in Victorian England, who consisted not only of 'prodigies' but also acrobats, singers, dancers, and actors.[7] Waters, in her study of child performers in the early and mid-Victorian theatre, notes three salient features of the stage child which still seem relevant today, namely; 'the emphasis on the marvellous, the publicity mongering and the parental shrewdness in exploiting a child's talent.'[8]

Certainly all three elements apply to Master William Henry West Betty, the first child performer to really make an impression on the theatre scene in London and the provinces, and who is said to have engendered 'mass hysteria' among his audiences.[9] Although his career only lasted three years from his debut in Belfast in 1803 to his last performance in London in 1806, 'Betty mania' provided much fodder for the press of the time, much as stories about child stars do now. There was even one famous occasion when the Prime Minister, Pitt, apparently adjourned the House of Commons so that members might be in time to see Betty's Hamlet. The boy star was said to have 'divided the world with Bonaparte.'[10] On one side there was his royal patronage and idolisation by the masses who named him the

'Infant Roscius' and, on the other, a more sceptical assessment of his talents by professional actors and actresses such as the indomitable Mrs Siddons who, in 1874, described him witheringly as: 'a very clever, pretty boy, but nothing more.'[11]

In Betty's wake came a host of 'young wonders' or 'infant prodigies' including the Infant Hercules, whose gift seems clear from his name, and the more obscure Infant Candlesnuffer whose special talent can only be guessed at. One element however, attracted audiences like no other—'naturalness,' an attribute which characterised the romantic image of the child which was gaining currency at this time through the work of poets and artists such as Wordsworth and Blake:

> As far as one can judge, what attracted audiences to child performers was the apparent spontaneity of their performances; from Betty onwards, the search was for untaught, natural genius.[12]

Ironically however, such 'natural genius,' especially in the arenas of acrobatics and dance, was often the result of fierce rearing and training techniques. As Steedman notes in her study of Victorian street and stage child acrobats and contortionists:

> The child-acrobat . . . was used to articulate ideas about child nurture and cruel and improper parental treatment of children in the same way as chimney sweeps and factory children were.[13]

The harsh training techniques employed by parents or the stereotypically heartless showmen who bought children from their families were recorded in detail and immortalised in literature, fixing forever the image of the abused and exploited performing child in the collective psyche. For example, in the nineteenth century Scott and Sims both drew on the pathetic image of the performing child for dramatic effect in their works:

> [He] beat her when she would not dance the rope, and starved her when she did to prevent her growth. (Sir Walter Scott, *Peveril of the Peak*, 1820)[14]

> *Lee:* This here is my boy Johnny, and he's going to do a spring and jump onto my shoulder, and then turn a double somersault on the ground.
> *Crowd:* And what are you going to do with yourself?'
> *Lee:* Why, take the money! (G.R Sims, *Master and Man,* play, 1889)[15]

The mistreatment of such children also brought up difficult, and to this day still contentious, issues about the ownership of the child's body and the rights of the parent over the rights of the child. Did the child belong to the parent to do with as they wished? Or was the child an individual with rights whom the state had a responsibility to protect? The shift towards the

latter viewpoint had already begun in Victorian society with the establishment of the Education Act (1876) which rendered schooling compulsory for children under 10 and the Factory Act (1833) which limited child labour. Lord Shaftesbury's last campaign to rescue child workers was the Children's Dangerous Performances Act of 1879 which outlawed putting a child under 14 through a performance that was likely to endanger life or limb.

However, the image of cruel parents submitting their underfed children to hours of torturous training in order to line their own pockets persisted even though the training of a child in a family craft was generally regarded as 'the epitome of symbiosis, trust and responsibility' in Victorian society.[16] To be a performer was somehow already being cast as incongruous with being a 'proper' child with 'proper' parents.

Another common sight on Victorian streets were the Italian child street musicians whose poor Neapolitan families were paid a fixed sum for the services of their child by 'Padroni' with the assurance that their offspring would be clothed, fed, and taught a musical instrument. These 'little slaves of the harp' as Zucchi[17] terms them, were the subject of much scandal all over Europe and America, associated as they were with child prostitution and the white slave trade, and the evil Padrone 'was to become the stock-type of socio-fiction and campaigning melodrama.'[18] As far as the social reformers were concerned then the message was clear: child performers had to be protected from adults for their own safety.

And it was not only children who performed on the street who were objects of concern. Back in the theatre, a particularly successful infant prodigy was Jean Davenport whose father launched her career in the mid 1830s and who ensured she successfully appeared as six different characters in the same production—an incredible feat of stamina and confidence which it is thought Charles Dickens may have seen her perform.[19] Indeed it seems certain that Dickens' seminal depiction of the 'infant phenomenon' Ninetta Crummles in *Nicholas Nickleby*, who is kept forever little on a diet of gin and water, is based on Davenport. Dickens' tragic portrait of Crummles, as quoted below, very much fed into subsequent social concerns about the welfare of performing children, as well as contributing to the emerging villainous image of the evil stage parent:

> 'This, sir,' said Mr Vincent Crummles, bringing the maiden forward, 'this is the infant phenomenon—Miss Ninetta Crummles' . . .
> 'May I ask how old she is?' inquired Nicholas.
> 'You may, sir,' replied Mr Crummles . . . 'she is ten years of age, sir.' . . .
> 'Dear me!' said Nicholas, 'it's very extraordinary.'
> It was; for the infant phenomenon, though of short stature, had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age—not perhaps to the full extent of the memory of the oldest inhabitant, but certainly for five good years. But she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water since infancy, to pre-

vent her growing tall, and perhaps this system of training had produced in the infant phenomenon these additional phenomena.[20]

However, the earnest concerns of largely middle-class social reformers over the safety of child performers were somewhat overshadowed by the boom in the number of licensed theatres and the popularity of public entertainment in the mid-Victorian era. A large number of children worked in theatres at this time, particularly in pantomimes, and dancing and gymnastic displays. It seems that the pitiless treatment of child performers as recorded in literature had become romanticised, perhaps even eroticised at this time. Indeed, a resonant stereotype of the child performer to emerge from this era was that of the 'tears behind the make-up,' embodying the theatrical tradition that the show must go on, despite any disparities between the professional public image and private suffering. A reviewer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported the pathetic backstage sight of:

> the young gentleman in pink tights and spangles . . . his sallow cheeks smeared with rouge. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 March 1885)

and another asked:

> 'what becomes of the elves and fairies . . . when the performance is over? (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 February 1885)

Fears began to surface about the futures of these children that are still being voiced in reference to child performers today:

> the evidence is that these unfortunates, if they do not get ruined entirely . . . never settle down to any industrial occupation.[21]

The reformers were clear as to their purpose; theatrical children had to be 'rescued' just as children working in factories and up chimneys had been. Ironically the stage performances of children dressed up as elves or fairies, endearingly cute, vulnerable, and 'childlike,' contributed to the wider process of the sacralisation of children in the late nineteenth century which fuelled reformers' idealist visions of children and childhood, whereby as Zelitzer has described 'having become economically useless to their families, children became emotionally priceless.'[22] This confusion between the actual qualities of children and the qualities required of the 'ideal' child represented on stage/screen has long been, and continues to be, an underlying tension in relation to child performers.

Far from the 'unnatural' contortions of the street acrobats, the pantomime elves and fairies were much closer to the romantic ideal of childhood as a time of innocence, vulnerability, and closeness to nature, and as such they represented a new way of looking at children and conceptualising

childhood. As mentioned previously, the ongoing obsession with 'natural' performances by children can be traced to this time. A reviewer of a production of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* in 1889 makes this priority clear:

> We must accord our tribute of praise to Miss Vera Beringer for the most natural child performance we have ever seen. (*The Playgoer*, May 1889)

and another describing the performance of Minnie Terry in 1888:

> This charmingly artless little maiden was conspicuously free from the precocious airs and graces that usually mar the pleasure to be derived from juvenile performers. (*The Era*, 12 May 1888)

In tandem with this valuing of the natural qualities of children came worries as to the corrupting influence of theatrical training and life in the world of entertainment, themes which again are very much relevant to contemporary child performers. Such was the degree of concern that a Parliamentary report was commissioned to investigate the 'terrible knowingness' of stage children which was euphemistically aligned to child sexuality and prostitution:

> [child actors are taught] to accompany every word by studied gesture and look . . . and made to practise the various expressions of passions—pride, contempt, love, hatred, pleasure, etc.—until each can be assumed at command.[23]

It was further claimed that all stage children had an 'insatiable thirst for admiration' and were used to being watched and seeing themselves 'as objects of someone else's contemplation.'[24]

   However, an illuminating article in *The Playgoer* from 1889 entitled 'Children on the Stage' presents a different point of view, claiming that the life of a stage child was preferable to alternative ways of making money, thus comprehensively locating 'child performer' as a working-class occupation. The description of poor children as 'creatures' who 'infest' the streets stands in stark contrast here to the 'angels' and 'fairies' of theatreland:

> Few who knew anything of the lives of children engaged in theatrical performances will speak against it, for it is infinitely better that these little creatures should be put in the way of earning an honest livelihood, and be placed under the supervision of trustworthy people, than that they should spend their lives playing in the gutters of our wretched slums . . . Stage children are well paid, and their salaries must make a most beneficial difference to the home economy . . . it would be a blessed thing if all the poor little ones who infest our streets could obtain theatrical engagements. (L. S. in *The Playgoer*, June 1889)[25]

However, L.S moves on to less philanthropic ground and makes no attempt to disguise his contempt for the 'unnatural' stage child, when he asserts that:

> The employment of children on the stage is excellent for children . . . but how about the audience? . . . a chorus sung by children, how shrill, tuneless and unpleasing, and last, but by no means least—in fact, by far the greatest infliction of all—the child actor or actress . . . Every attitude is the result of laborious study and practice . . . It is not the children on that stage that need our sympathy . . . it is the unfortunate playgoers doomed to sit out these pigmy efforts who are really deserving of commiseration.[26]

This association of child performers as low-grade, unsophisticated entertainment for the masses goes some way to explaining the decline in popularity of child wonders in the latter part of the nineteenth century. As theatre productions and performances became more professional due to the cultural influence of the middle-class audience, the cheap home-made spectacle of the infant prodigy struggled to impress or entertain. For example, in the late 1850s, the critic Morley wrote a scathing account of the laboured meticulousness of the performances of Kate and Helen Bateman, aged six and eight:,'[Who are] both pretty and clever, but whose appearance . . . is a nuisance by no means proportioned to the size of its perpetrators,' and he describes the 'wearisome absurdity of such big words in such small mouths.'[27]

Marie Bancroft, who herself had been a child performer who remembered 'only work and responsibility from a very tender age,' wrote jubilantly, if not somewhat prematurely, in 1886 that the fashion for child prodigies was finally over, declaring portentously, 'Fortunate children, fortunate public!'[28] That she was so very wrong demonstrates the seemingly insatiable public desire to be entertained by 'marvellous' children, coupled with a growing dissent for the practice of allowing children to perform in such a way—an uneasy dichotomy which has endured in relation to children who work in the entertainment industry.

From this account of child performers in the Victorian era, then, several salient themes can be identified which still seem relevant to today's child stars and which indicate the incongruity of the category to the dominant discourse on childhood as a prolonged period of protected innocence which was emerging at the time. These are:

- Tensions surrounding ownership of the child (does a child 'belong' to its parents, to the state, or to itself?).
- The negative image of the parents/guardians of performing children (as cruel, self-seeking, greedy, and so on).
- The incongruity of being a performing child with being a 'normal' child (in much the same way as factory children were not 'normal' children).

- The perception of performing children as objects of pity and ridicule.
- The perception of performing children as objects of hope and nostalgia.
- The fundamental importance to the audience of a child's performance being 'natural.'
- The uncomfortable association of performing children with child sexuality.
- Concerns over the moral welfare and future lives of performing children.
- The identification of being a child performer as a working-class profession.

These conflicting views and attitudes towards child performers, and the cultural stereotypes of such children and the adults who were connected with them, carried through into the twentieth century as child performers moved from the stage and street to the big screen and then onto television.

AMERICAN VAUDEVILLE

If English theatre had become, temporarily at least, somewhat too sophisticated for the child performer to reach the levels of success prodigies such as Betty and Davenport had previously achieved, it was a different story in America where cheap, sentimental, travelling entertainment was very much in demand. In the mid-nineteenth century, male-dominated audiences at remote gold rush camps were reduced to tears (and generous financial gestures of appreciation) by all-singing, all-dancing dolls or 'fairy stars' who reminded them of the families they had left behind.

One of the most famous such 'fairy stars' was Lotta Crabtree (born 1847), the child of a miner and a very ambitious mother who evidently saw in her young daughter a way out of the isolation and privation of life in the remote town of Rabbit Creek. Cary describes how miners in the street would reach out just to touch the little girl's hand, 'drinking in the presence of this child who symbolised the home and family forsaken in their lonely quest for gold,'[29] leading her mother Mary Ann to devise a song and dance routine for Lotta which made the most of her childish exuberance and angelic appearance. According to Cary, Lotta's act was received with such adoration by the locals that Mary Ann set off with her daughter on a mule wagon around America to take the show to the outermost camps where small communities of men 'starved for diversion and loaded with gold' welcomed them with open arms. Understandably overwhelmed by the frightening strangeness of her surroundings, Cary notes that Lotta often became deeply despondent just before a show and that Mary Ann would cajole and boost up the child by any means possible to ensure her daughter would perform well so that

there would be plenty of coins thrown on stage at the end which Mary Ann could collect up in her apron. The perilous journeys involved in reaching outpost camps are reported to have added to the young girl's sense of disorientation and anxiety, and she told years later of 'waking one night as her mule picked his way along a thread of canyon trail to see, far ahead, a lone horse and rider plunge soundlessly over the edge into the purple mists below.'[30] How far such stories about young Lotta have been embellished to add to her legendary status is, of course, open to speculation.

Lotta went on to appear at 'bit' theatres, road shows, and in melodeons (an early form of vaudeville) before becoming in her early teens 'Miss Lotta, the San Francisco Favourite,' an 'irresistible confection of wicked innocence'[31]—a persona devised by Mary Ann, with which Lotta is recorded as winning large audiences in Boston and Chicago. In classic melodramatic fashion, the story is that Lotta still looked and acted like a child on stage at the age of thirty-five, and her mother never let go of the iron grip she had on her daughter's life, ensuring that Lotta remained fully dependent on her without a husband or close friends.

It is easy to see how Mary Ann became as famous for being the archetypal pushy parent as Lotta did for being the original fairy star of the gold rush camps. Ma Crabtree apparently became something of a legend amongst American would-be stage mothers, and it seems that many admired her forthright determination in managing her daughter's career.[32] Although the image of the stage mother has become a monstrous stereotyped inversion of the 'normal' parent–child relationship whereby the parent is seen to be using the child to fulfil their own financial and emotional needs, it is worth noting that women like Mary Ann Crabtree no doubt had to be fierce in order to protect their children in such a rough and ready environment as pioneering American theatre, especially as their livelihoods depended on their protégées remaining, or at least appearing, naïve and 'natural.'

Clearly the concept of the child as the property of his or her parents to be directed and manipulated without taking into consideration whether or not the child actually wished to be a performer appears to have been the prevalent attitude towards such children at the time. This concept of parental ownership of their offspring was also reflected in the accepted use of corporal punishment in the home, and the widespread practice of withdrawing children from school to assist in domestic labour, farm work, or paid employment outside the home.[33] It is understandable that given the harsh reality of life for poor immigrants in nineteenth-century America a somewhat hard attitude to child rearing was part of the culture and that exploiting potential sources of income overrode the ideal of protecting children and childhood from the economic, adult world. Perhaps it is because it has always been the children of the poor who have worked in any capacity that being a child performer became so associated with the working class and as such was distanced from burgeoning middle-class ideals about the 'normal' roles and places for children in their own separate world of childhood.

However, the next generation of child performers in American vaude-ville continued to exploit the sentimental ideal of childhood whilst living a life which was far removed from the sensibilities of the delicate children they represented. Performers such as Baby Gladys Smith (who later became Mary Pickford) and little Elsie Janis moved audiences to tears with maudlin songs about love and loss whilst their mothers busied themselves ensuring their prodigy's success. In her memoirs, Elsie Janis recalls the day in 1898 that she was offered a salary of $125 a week by a Buffalo theatre owner and that from then on her cold mother found a new dedication to her child:

> Mother marched head up, eyes front my hand in hers, her life in mine. Men meant nothing to her unless they were interested in me, and if they were not, it was unfortunate for them, as I was ever present.[34]

The widespread misery caused by childhood death due to epidemics of scarlet fever and diphtheria in American cities at this time was also used to dramatic advantage on stage in a multitude of Dickens-inspired plays and the ubiquitous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* featuring child actresses such as Lillian Gish and Cordelia Howard. By presenting dying children as innocent babes, who were transformed into 'angel children,' the performances of the child actors had the power to comfort and reassure their audiences. Indeed, as Cary describes below, it seems that the redemptive nature of Little Eva's death in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* altered the very position that theatre occupied in many god-fearing American towns:

> (the) play also qualified as a genuine religious drama, thereby breaking the long-standing preacher's ban on 'Satan's Palace,' as the faithful referred to the theatre. Attending a performance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became an obligation of conscience for thousands of devout Christians who had formerly shunned the proscenium as the very gate of Hell.[35]

This power of the child performer to bring people together by symbolising hope and eliciting emotion was seized upon by the Hollywood movie makers in the early twentieth century who began to realise the fortunes that could be made by presenting the public with the right kinds of 'star.'

The popularity of vaudeville entertainment in the early 1900s provided fertile ground for a huge variety of singing, dancing, contortionist, and comedy acts to hone their skills all over America. *Variety* magazine, which started in 1905, is an interesting source of information on such acts, yet children do not feature heavily in their reviews as regulations passed by the children's society at the turn of the century prevented many from performing at all. Indeed, such was their scarcity on stage that the pull of one advert for a seasonal pantomime was 'real, live children, real, live monkeys.'[36] Perhaps this lack of 'real' children explains the appeal of the 'childlike' Eva Tanguay, arguably the most successful performer in vaudeville history:

> 'I want so much to be understood!' That little plea sums up all the childlike sincerity of Eva Tanguay. She likes, dislikes, is pleased and made happy; her heart is touched, by flashes—with the acute sensibilities of a child . . . It is this childlike appeal that has made Miss Tanguay nationally popular. The gleefulness, the half impudent assurance, the humour—each quality is distinctly childlike. Her costumes might easily be startling—but they never seem anything but delightfully comic. Miss Tanguay is a sort of girl-who-wouldn't-grow-up. She is Peter Pan in real life. (*Variety*, 30 January 1915)

However, some child performers did slip though the net and travelled round the country as part of (usually family) vaudeville acts, and it was from this limited pool that the initial child cinema actors were selected. Interestingly, in the early days of cinema acting in films was considered by performers as the poor relation of treading the boards, and those who did act on camera were certainly not proud of it. For example, Mary Pickford, who went on to be America's first real movie star, apparently only went looking for studio work because roles on Broadway had dried up for her and, in 1909 at the age of sixteen, she had outgrown her previous incarnation as baby Gladys on the vaudeville circuit. Cary describes Pickford's success as due to her ability to connect with a wide audience and represent the all-American values which were beginning to characterise the era:

> Mary personified youthful America on the threshold of a century of promise, peace and scientific progress. She was a spunky girl, someone that the immigrant, the country folk and the self-made man could all believe in. Obviously America and the girl who became America's sweetheart were born to win.[37]

Reaching adulthood did not prevent Pickford from continuing her 'Little Mary' girlish persona, and some of her most successful films were made when she was in her thirties. However, Pickford was also among the first to discover the lifelong repercussions of being a well-known child actor on film, commenting when she finally retired that:

> The little girl made me. I wasn't waiting for the little girl to kill me, I'd already been pigeonholed . . . My career was planned, there was never anything accidental about it. It was planned, it was painful, it was purposeful. I'm not exactly satisfied, but I'm grateful.[38]

THE HOLLYWOOD CHILD STAR ERA

Although, as demonstrated earlier, occasionally particularly talented or popular child performers had been recognised throughout the nineteenth century, the concept of the 'child star' in our modern understanding of the term was not viable until the age of cinema. Previous to this time the height

of fame for a child (or any) performer would be to be featured in an article in a review publication such as *Interlude* in the U.K. or *Variety* in America. Such publicity would ensure a full house for the next performance and perhaps guarantee a run of bookings for the coming season. From the available evidence it appears that the quality of the performance was all that mattered—nobody was particularly fascinated with the actual child and his/her offstage life. The child as a 'star' was something altogether different—an invention of the film industry, created, packaged, and presented in order to delight audiences. Once the potential had been established for capturing on film those qualities of childhood which were perceived as particularly endearing in the early twentieth century, all that was necessary was to find the children who embodied, or mimicked, such qualities more than most.

The seminal performance that sparked not just the beginning of the most successful child actor's career of all time, but which also started the phenomenon of the Child Star Era as characterised by personalised and obsessional tributes to an individual performer, was that of the six-year-old Jackie Coogan as a charming ragamuffin in *The Kid*[39] in 1920. Coogan was 'discovered' by Charlie Chaplin, who was himself a former child performer in British vaudeville, and Cary describes the significant and symbolic moment when four-year-old Coogan, who had fallen asleep while Chaplin and his father discussed the terms of his contract, woke up to find himself:

> in another world, where he, the hoofer's son, had been transformed into a veritable angel child, complete with luminous spirituality and truly awesome redemptive powers.[40]

The height of fame to which Coogan shot was unprecedented, indicating perhaps that American audiences were more than ready to embrace children (the cuter the better) as the new stars of the cinema:

> Jack Coogan . . . has achieved cinemagraphic fame more suddenly and at a younger age, probably than any other screen player. (*New York Times*, 13 February 1921)

Coogan supported his entire family with the fortune he made from appearing in a dozen or more films, and they lived a privileged lifestyle, splitting their time between a ranch in California and a house in Hollywood; and in a 1923 deal with Metro, Coogan received 60% of the profits from his films, making him one of the highest earners in the country. Although the practice of working-class children contributing to the household income was an established and normalised activity at the turn of the century in America, it was rare even in those times for a child to be expected to take full responsibility in supporting their families. As Nasaw explains in relation to the children who sold newspapers, shined shoes, and shucked oysters in New York, Boston, and all over the United States:

> The children of the city were not ascetics or martyrs or heads of household who had to save all their money to support their families. They were children who worked hard and wanted to enjoy the fruits of their labour.[41]

How much Coogan enjoyed the 'fruits of his labour' in the early years is debatable, and was certainly short-lived; with the onset of puberty Coogan's appeal diminished, and although he made some films in his teens and early twenties they were not favourably received. Believing that a large portion of the money he had earned was in a trust fund to be accessed on his twenty-first birthday, Coogan was shocked to discover when the time came that the sum was actually just $1,000. He took his mother and her husband (his manager) to court and sued them for $4 million, although his mother claimed that she was entitled to everything Coogan had earned before he had become an adult. Indeed, in an interview he quoted his mother as saying: 'It's all mine and Arthur's and so far as we are concerned you'll never get a cent.'[42]

After a lengthy legal battle, Coogan eventually received just $126,000, and in 1939 his wife, Betty Grable, left him, saying that they 'hoped to return to each other when his financial troubles were straightened out.'[43] Later that year what was to become known as 'Coogan's Law' was approved, which stated that in future a child's earnings should belong to the child in order to protect young performers against parasitic parents or guardians. This shift in legal favour towards the child performer coincided with wider changes relating to childhood throughout American society during the first decades of the twentieth century, whereby children were beginning to be recognised as having rights and being in need of protection by state legislation regarding their employment and education, rather than simply as the property of their parents.[44]

Perhaps predictably, even though Coogan went on to have a fairly successful and long television career, re-marry, and even have a reconciliation of sorts with his mother, he is still presented as a failure and a tragic figure in contemporary retrospectives:

> [his] tragedy was that, throughout his life, he was defined by a part he played when he was just six years old. His only other career high point came in the 1960s when he played Uncle Fester in the cult TV show 'The Addams Family,' He once said: "I used to be the most beautiful child in the world and now I'm a hideous monster." (*The Herald*, 22 November, 2002)

Coogan's unfortunate relationship with his parents and the subsequent well-publicised legal battles that ensued may go some way to explaining why being a successful child (even an extraordinarily successful one) is automatically assumed to be a negative experience. The reporting of his troubles in the press and gossip columns set the precedent for reporting scandal in relation to former child stars because of the impact such stories carry, confounding as

they do both expectations of 'normal' family life and childhoods and the image of perfection which the actor represented on screen as a child.

However, the huge success of *The Kid* and Coogan's immense childhood wealth inspired many American families to view their children as potential sources of fame and fortune. Indeed, as Coogan's own father had commented at the height of Jackie's fame: 'He is a fine little fellow and a gold mine for us.'[45]

Subsequently, many legendary child stars originated in this era, including Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, Freddie Bartholomew, and Judy Garland. Diana Serra Cary, a former child star who became famous during the 1920s as Baby Peggy, explained the situation thus:

> Although the child star business was a very new line to be in, it opened up a wide choice of jobs for many otherwise unskilled workers, and it grew with remarkable speed. Speed was, in fact, the name of the game. Parents, agents, producers, business managers, and a host of lesser hangers-on were all engaged in a desperate race to keep ahead of their meal ticket's inexorable march from cuddly infant to graceless adolescent.[46]

The child had become a commodity again in an otherwise financially unproductive period of life. For the possibility of wealth and fame it seems, it was acceptable to disregard social conventions regarding education and schooling, the privacy of childhood, and the place of the child as a dependent who is protected by the family. This is in stark contrast to the vision of 'the century of the child' which attracted reformers for most of the first half of the twentieth century. As Cunningham describes:

> Their overriding aim was to map out a territory called 'childhood,' and put in place frontier posts which would prevent too early escape from what was seen as desirably a garden of delight. Within this garden children would be cared for and would acquire the 'habit of happiness.'[47]

Given this, the question then arises as to how the Hollywood machine was able to counteract the unsavoury image of buying and selling the cutest children to the highest bidder to work in an industry which had ostensibly no honour, tradition, or responsibility. The answer appears to be by creating an image of the child star as totally unlike other children—as gifted, wise, with almost magical qualities—children who were 'too good' for a normal life, whose purpose was to bring joy and happiness to audiences (for example, six-year-old Margaret O'Brien was described in a 1943 *Photoplay* feature article as 'this amazing piece of humanity'). Such children were 'angels' on screen and off, the child actor became the child on screen and vice versa, the removal of the child star from the category of 'normal' children had begun in earnest, and the greatest screen angel of all time was undoubtedly Shirley Temple.

The Great Depression was a boom time for the American film industry, representing as it did a form of escapism from the harsh realities of the daily lives of the audiences. Shirley Temple was the top box office attraction from 1935–38 and represented, for many, the epitome of childhood goodness and sentiment, a beacon of hope for the future of America and the physical embodiment of the perfect child:

> Her bouncing, blond curls, effervescence and impeccable charm were the basis for a Depression-era phenomenon. Portraying a doll-like model daughter, she helped ease the pain of audiences the world over.[48]

Throughout her career, Temple always played the part of the redemptive child in films, providing comfort to flawed and corrupt, usually male, adults with her charm and naïve wisdom. For example in the 1936 film *Dimples*[49] Temple plays a rough diamond in a gang of street urchins who takes the blame for a theft that was actually carried out by a wealthy, elderly Professor. His revelation of the 'true meaning' of goodness as taught him by Temple's selfless act is facilitated through her undemanding, simple demeanour and unconditional love for the old man. He calls her his 'little angel' and a 'remarkable child' and rescues her from the street to come and live with him in his opulent mansion. Temple is thus rewarded for her natural goodness, and the old man has become a better person through his association with this 'angel child.'

The sexual undertones of Temple's films which often included her sitting on men's laps, touching their faces, and being the object of their adoration and fascination make uncomfortable viewing today. However, they can be read as symptomatic of the way in which Temple was idolised at the time and elevated beyond the 'normal' parameters of childhood, whereby acceptable adult–child relations no longer applied. In effect, within that construction of Temple as a perfect doll child, it was acceptable to see men fondle her because she was 'Shirley Temple' who belonged to everyone, whose role was simply to make people happy, and whose distinctness from 'normal' children was part and parcel of her appeal. Indeed, the strength of Temple's performances emanated from her ability to elicit emotional reactions from her audience who were content to sit through similar plots acted out again and again in various scenarios throughout the 1930s.

Interestingly Graham Greene, recently returned from Mexico and watching Temple's films with fresh eyes, was less than impressed by her saccharine, studied performance. Alleging in a review of the 1937 film *Wee Willie Winkie*[50] that she was an 'adult impersonating a child'[51] Greene threatened the very fantasy of the real yet ideal child that Temple represented, and the subsequent litigation bankrupted the magazine which carried his article. Clearly, in relation to child stars, only one kind of article was acceptable to the extremely powerful studio bosses—the kind which reinforced the image of the child which was presented on screen.

Photoplay magazine was one of several publications who were happy to bolster the manufactured profiles of all Hollywood stars, including children. In a feature article about 'The Little Rascals' (also referred to as 'Our Gang,' a popular fictional group of scruffy yet endearing children who appeared in many films in the 1920s and 30s) it is clear that there is to be no division between where the child actor ends and the character he/she plays begins, with Jackie Condon being presented as identical to the 'rough' character he played:

> Jackie Condon of 'Our Gang' is the tousled haired youngster who is always tagging along after any neighbourhood gang. He's a sympathetic character and is always serious. A few months ago Warren Doane, general manager of the Hal Roach studios, was leaving for New York on a business trip:
> "What shall I bring you Jackie?" he asked.
> "Bring me a rabbit, a little live rabbit," Jackie answered, and then after some thought, added: "*And bring me a gun to shoot it with*." (*Photoplay*, May 1925)

The pressure on child actors to maintain the image created for them by the studios proved too much for many to bear. Judy Garland is a classic example of someone who experienced a much happier childhood in print than in reality. After all, how could Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*[52] be anything but carefree and innocent? As this extract from a *Photoplay* article celebrating her eighteenth birthday in 1940 illustrates, Garland's public image was of a deliriously happy young woman with the world at her feet:

> She works harder than most eighteen-year-olds; has to go to bed early to be fresh for work and on the lot for make-up at six a.m., but Judy is so happy she can't believe it . . ."Last year was wonderful," she said. "This one will be even better because I'm older. It's grand to be getting older," she said with real feeling. (*Photoplay*, September 1940)[53]

Who would have believed then what subsequent biographies have revealed: that she was desperately unhappy, addicted to the diet pills and amphetamines supplied by the studio, and denied access to the education which may have provided her with some sense of self-worth?

Freddie Bartholomew (born 1924) is another example of a child star whose real life experiences were in stark contrast to his poised and graceful film persona, most critically acclaimed when he played Little Lord Fauntleroy in 1936. Having been abandoned by his overburdened mother when he was a toddler and looked after by his Aunt Myllicent, who later took him to America, Freddie went on to achieve an outstandingly successful and lucrative career as a child star. The subsequent reappearance of his long-lost parents and the battles over money and ownership of the child which followed must have been utterly bewildering for the young actor. Zierold describes how the

mercenary Mrs Bartholomew debarked at New York claiming that her new-found interest in her son was due solely to motherly love and that she was truly unconcerned with the financial gain such a close bond might engender:

> My visit here is not actuated from a monetary standpoint, nor do I wish to deprive his Aunt Myllicent of any of the rightful and proper benefits which may accrue to her as a result of his success. I do not desire to embarrass my boy's career, but feel that his love and affection should not be weaned away from his parents. (Lillian Mae Bartholomew, 8 April 1936)[54]

Unfortunately for Freddie, however, it seemed that motherly love did come at a price; by the time he was fifteen, he had been in and out of court an average of twice a month since arriving in America in 1934. Having had to pay so many lawyers' fees and having had to share out his earnings amongst his aunt, mother, father, grandparents, and even his sisters who had initially not even believed that the juvenile movie star was their brother, Freddie ended up with little to show for his early film success and was certainly not living the privileged life of an upper class youth as he was so often depicted on screen and in the media.

The conflation of fantasy and reality regarding the lives of actors and actresses which was (and to some extent still is) perpetrated by the Hollywood film industry in order to create the 'star system' was a vital ingredient in the further separation between the child star and the 'normal' child in the early to mid-twentieth century. However, when horror stories such as Garland's and Bartholomew's became public knowledge, child stars became a much more complicated phenomenon than the Hollywood star machine ever wanted them to be. Rather than simply being living embodiments of perfect children, child stars had become cultural icons of both hope and sadness. They were the stars who represented everything people wanted their children to be in terms of their on-screen appearance and behaviour, and yet nothing they wanted their children to be, at the same time. Once again the tensions surrounding child performers emanating from Victorian times seemed to be in evidence as issues of ownership, 'normality,' and concerns over the moral welfare of the child came into play, along with the ubiquitous stereotype of the pushy parent of the crowd-pleasing child who is both adored and pitied.

CHILD STARS ON TELEVISION

The studio system, and with it the classic Child Star Era, began to crumble in the 1940s when the improbability of a child like Shirley Temple solving adult problems no longer seemed acceptable to a war-hardened audience. Coupled with the growing popularity and affordability of television and the postwar focus on domestic life and consumerism, the scene was set

for a new kind of child star who was more kid next door than angel, and by the 1950s child actors had become part of the cultural landscape once again in the U.S.A. This time they were part of solidly middle-class, two-parent nuclear families in sitcoms such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet*. The stereotypical gender roles of mom and dad (often comically inverted) and the 'cute but cheeky' kids reinforced old-fashioned values of family cohesion and togetherness which characterised post-war American idealism. As Ryan puts it:

> They were wholesome, clean-cut, Wonder Bread kids who were living the American dream as much as they were creating it, week in and week out, on their beyond reproach TV series.[55]

A different set of criteria was used in their selection, and a new context was provided for their performances, and yet once again the overriding demand was for child actors who could be 'natural':

> to be a successful kid star of TV's Golden Era you had to look and sound natural. Even if your lines were scripted. Even if your days were produced. Even if your lives were anything but. You had to be natural. Naturally.[56]

Andrea Darvi, herself a child star of the 1960s, describes the ruthless casting and audition processes which ensured that the right children, from the many, many hopefuls, were chosen for the right parts on TV shows and adverts in America. She explains how most agencies adhered to the motto 'in at six, out at ten' due to the superior selling power of children in that age range who are generally old enough to read scripts and yet are still far away from the dreaded adolescence. However, what was even more important than chronological age was being small, being able to follow directions, and fitting the physical specification of the role, which was usually a WASPy all-American blond child, but sometimes a Mexican waif or a 'street-wise' kid from the ghetto. Whatever the appearance of the child, though, the 'type' had to be the same:

> fresh, innocent, the inexperienced kid untainted by overexposure, either by success or failure . . . [Directors] say "Send us a real kid, not a Hollywood kid." [57]

Ironically however, the behaviour demanded of such 'real' kids was of a truly professional standard. As Iris Burton, a powerful children's agent of that time put it:

> You have to give them today's kid, one who can get out, put in eight hours of work, know his lines, not be restless on the set, and behave like a professional.[58]

Even if a child fulfilled all of the casting directors' conflicting criteria and landed a coveted well-paid part in a sit-com or TV drama, the clock was always ticking on the longevity of their suitability for the role. Darvi describes how painful it was when her acting career came to an end at the relatively advanced age of sixteen:

> My specialness faded as quickly and inexplicably as it had arrived. I was nothing more I had been led to believe than the sum total of my roles, and as they became fragments of an ever-distant past, my present became ever more inconsequential. My life seemed as empty and meaningless as a blank television screen after the last credit has rolled by.[59]

Although the majority of former child stars from the 1960s managed to find alternative careers as adults often within the entertainment industry as agents or directors themselves[60] and a few were even able to continue acting, others found it extremely hard to accept that the most successful and lucrative period of their life was very probably behind them.

This may explain why many golden child stars of 1950s and 60s American television shows ended up involved in drugs and crime in later life, further contributing to the received wisdom that 'too much too young' is never a good thing and providing evidence for the enduring myth that somehow child stars are cursed. For example, Tommy Reitig, who had been the original dog's best friend in *Lassie* for several years (until he was replaced by a younger actor) ended up making headlines in 1975 as he was sent to prison for five years for dealing cocaine:

> LASSIE'S FIRST MASTER ACCUSED OF COCAINE KARMA (*Village Voice*, 5 January 1976)

A few other examples (although there are many more) are Danny Bonaduce from *The Partridge Family,* who was arrested and charged for drug-related offences several times throughout the 1980s; Mackenzie Phillips, star of *One Day at a Time,* who nearly died twice from overdoses; and Anissa Jones, 'Little Buffy' in *Family Affair*, who was found dead in a friend's pool house in 1976 at the age of eighteen from 'one of the most severe cases of drug overdose ever seen in San Diego County.'[61] Trent Lehman, the '100% real boy' from *Nanny and the Professor*, a show which one TV guide had described as a 'half hour bit of fluff,' ended up hanging himself with a leather belt from a chain-link fence in 1982, aged twenty, after failing to find work after he was let go from the show for getting too big.[62] As his agent commented pragmatically: 'Sometimes the older kids have trouble finding work. The little kids are cuter.'[63]

Similarly, Rusty Hamer, who became a huge star when he was seven in *Make Room for Daddy* and was described by an adult co-star as 'the best boy actor I ever saw in my life,' also failed to make it as an adult actor. In

1966 at age nineteen he nearly died after shooting himself in the stomach, before finally committing suicide at the age of forty-two after decades of depression and despair.[64]

The child stars of TV shows in the 1970s and 80s didn't seem to fare much better, and the public appetite for a juicy 'child star turned bad' story seemed to be insatiable. The most famous troubled kids were the stars of the inter-racial American sit-com *Diff'rent Strokes,* Gary Coleman, Dana Plato, and Todd Bridges, who ended up respectively as a national laughing stock, dead of a drug overdose, and in prison for selling crack cocaine.[65]

In the U.K. as well, the child star became a popular TV curiosity, with the singers Lena Zavaroni and Bonnie Langford having their own prime time show in the 1970s after having made it big on Huey Green's *Opportunity Knocks*. Zavaroni's emaciated adolescent body dressed up in little girl bows and frills makes extraordinarily uncomfortable viewing in retrospect, and her premature death from anorexia nervosa in 1998 renders her as yet another tragic casualty of the supposed 'curse' of the child star. This extract from an obituary to Zavaroni makes explicit this connection between her early success and her unhappy adulthood:

> In many ways, Zavaroni's problems were typical of those beset by many pre-pubescent stars: the loss of childhood, massive public attention, and the difficulty of transposing childhood talent into an adult package when show business—and, to some extent, the audience—only thrilled to the child/voice combination. (*The Guardian*, 5 October 1999)[66]

It doesn't always end in tears, of course. For example, Aled Jones, the choir boy with the beautiful voice who shot to fame in 1983 with 'Walking in the Air,' has gone on to have a successful career as a television presenter and simply regards his early fame as an amusing and slightly embarrassing experience. Even so, he still recognises the strangeness of his childhood celebrity, conceding in an interview that: 'It should have been weird but it wasn't. I enjoyed going to school. I kept the two lives completely separate.'[67]

The music industry in America too has produced its fair share of child stars since the 1960s, the most infamous being Michael Jackson, who was born in 1958 and had his first hit with his brothers (The Jackson Five) in 1969 with 'I Want You Back.' Jackson's solo career began in 1972, and he enjoyed stratospheric success into adulthood with albums such as *Thriller* selling more than 50 million copies. However, his personal life and appearance became more and more bizarre over the years, culminating in a well-publicised court case in 2005 in which he was accused, and later found innocent of, sexually abusing the young boys who he often had to stay over at his Neverland Ranch. Jackson justified his unusual lifestyle by claiming he preferred the company of children to adults and that he considered himself to be a Peter Pan character—the boy who never grew up.[68] The temptation to connect Jackson's 'idiosyncrasies' with his early stardom, which seems to

have been driven by a particularly abusive style of parenting, is difficult to resist and the overriding consensus on Jackson's oddness is that it is due to him not having had a 'normal' childhood.

The link between early success in the entertainment world and future unhappiness as an adult was well and truly established by the press by the 1970s, and the thrilling shock value of such stories of despair and disappointment has ensured their continuing presence as a stock newspaper narrative ever since. The reconstruction of the child star as an object of pity and ridicule in the late twentieth century can be seen to have its antecedents both in the depiction of poor Victorian stage children and street performers with pushy parents and unscrupulous managers, and in the casting of adorable child actors as objects of poetic misery and suffering (who always somehow pull through due to their ability to melt adults' hearts) in Hollywood movies of the Child Star Era. That there is an erotic element to the 'punishment' of the 'naughty' child star who has not been as good as gold or, perversely, has tried too hard to please, appears to be a plausible explanation for the endurance of this image and the fact that child stars occupy a position which has a cultural significance beyond their performances seems certain.

LATER CHILD STARS OF THE CINEMA

Whereas the children on the small screen were designed to embody wholesome family values and deliver cute 'kids' wisdom,' those on the big screen seemed to be fulfilling a different role entirely. The popularity of films in the 1970s featuring 'demonic' children has been interpreted as a reaction to the wholesome image of TV kids from the 1950s and 60s as well as an expression of fears about the breakdown of the nuclear family and permissive styles of parenting.[69] Films such as *The Exorcist,*[70] *The Omen,*[71] and *Poltergeist*[72] all dealt with murderously possessed children who completely inverted the saccharine sweet child stars of earlier eras. Child actors in the 1970s also became associated with something even more horrifying than violence—sex. Brooke Shields and Jodie Foster caused a moral outrage in middle America by playing teen prostitutes in, respectively *Pretty Baby*[73] and *Taxi Driver*[74] in the 1970s, and Tatum O'Neal shocked audiences by exhibiting sexual awareness and swearing in *The Bad News Bears* [75] and *Little Darlings*[76] in the same period. However, the very fact that children acting out scenes of violence and sex were greeted with such fascinated awe and controversy only served to reinforce the shared public consensus as to appropriate behaviour and boundaries for children and childhood. Far from heralding a new era of emancipated children, such films simply inverted expectations of children on screen for the shock value. Later films such as *Kids*[77] and *City of God*[78] which focused on the harsh reality of the lives of 'real' children living chaotic and violent lives due to the breakdown of the social order have often failed to achieve the same levels of mainstream commercial success, suggesting that

the role of children in cinema is to reinforce certain images of childhood and not others.

However, even though the image of the innocent child star had apparently passed its 'sell by' date by the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s brought a new wave of wonder children who continued to bring an air of purity and goodness to the cinema, albeit in a more knowing style than the starlets from the 1920s and 30s.

For example, Drew Barrymore's role as the wide-eyed, adorable Gertie in Spielberg's *E.T.*[79] in 1981 at the age of six catapulted her to child stardom, and she later described making the film as the best time of her life. Unfortunately, the rest of Barrymore's childhood descended into chaos as she became heavily involved in alcohol and drugs until at thirteen she was admitted to a rehabilitation centre. Her autobiography which was written at the age of fourteen (as only a child star's can be) is a painful account of the confusion she felt as a child and the disparity between the comforting experience of being part of a 'family' on film sets, only to be an outsider in her own dysfunctional family and a stranger to her peers at school. As she puts it:

> I've always grappled with the clash of image versus reality. The public saw me as Drew Barrymore, movie star, while I viewed myself quite differently—as a sad, lonely and unattractive girl with not much to her advantage . . . I wanted to shout "Hey, I didn't want to be famous. I just want to be loved."[80]

Barrymore's complicated relationship with her parents surely did not help this low self-esteem as she recalls that her mother, a failed actress, was apparently determined to have her moment in the spotlight on the back of Drew's success even if that meant taking her child to nightclubs and parties from the age of seven, and her father, the actor John Barrymore, himself an alcoholic-addict, would appear periodically in Drew's life demanding money.

Given these elements of neglect and self-destruction, Barrymore's story fitted neatly into the tradition of 'child star gone bad' media exposés which started in the 1960s and 70s, and yet also resonates with the pathos of Victorian depictions of child performers whose value is seen as solely economic and whose personal happiness is of no particular concern to the adults around them. That Barrymore managed to recover from her addictions and went on to have a successful adult career in film is testament to her ability as an actress and the clever way in which she reinvented herself as an adult version of her childhood screen persona by playing kooky comedic parts in light-weight 'feel-good' movies.

However, the most famous child star of the 1980s was Macaulay Culkin, the star of the first two *Home Alone*[81] movies, who was the very incarnation of the superior, redemptive child. His 'natural goodness' stood in sharp relief to the greed and ignorance of the criminal adults he managed to outwit in the films, having been literally (if accidentally) abandoned by his parents.

The disordered family life and private miseries behind Culkin's trademark boyish grin were not to become public until the inevitable fall from grace of the young actor as he became an awkward adolescent and the film roles dried up. The fact that in 2005 Culkin was called as a witness for both the defence and the prosecution in the Michael Jackson child abuse court case goes some way to indicate the strangeness of Culkin's childhood and his subsequent life, let alone those of Jackson himself.[82]

In the 1990s and early 2000s, two of the most successful child stars in America were Haley Joel Osment and Dakota Fanning, both of whom with their frail fair bodies and huge, innocent eyes, represented the supernatural goodness of children as foils to the corruption of adults in a much more sophisticated way than Culkin had done a decade earlier. Osment (born 1988) had been described as the best young actor of his generation due to his sensitive portrayals in films such as *The Sixth Sense*,[83] in which he played a child with the gift of being able to see dead people, and *A.I.*,[84] in which he was the robot child who taught his human mother the 'real' meaning of love. Clearly mindful of the time limit of his appeal as redemptive child on screen, Osment had one eye on the future when he commented that:

> For me it's most important to find the films that will last. . . . choice is the most important thing because I'm going to be an adult actor pretty soon. So I've got to be choosing the right roles now so that by the time I get to that age there will be wide options available.[85]

But Osment's arrest for drunk driving and possession of marijuana in 2006 at the age of eighteen suggests that his ambition to make the tricky transition from child star to credible adult actor may be more complicated than simply 'choosing' the right roles.[86]

Dakota Fanning (born 1994) whose extensive credits include playing a troubled alien in the television series *Taken* and the daughter of a mentally retarded man in *I Am Sam*[87]—a performance for which she became, at eight, the youngest person ever to be nominated for a Screen Actors Guild Award—also seemed aware of the dangers of being stigmatised as a child star when she claimed: 'I'm just a normal kid, really. I just love to act.'[88] However, the fact that her roles and the level of her success consistently have portrayed her as anything but 'normal' may make her early identity as an extraordinary child somewhat hard to escape.

In the U.K., Daniel Radcliffe (born 1989) began playing Harry Potter in the filmic versions of the phenomenally successful children's novels by J.K. Rowling when he was eleven. In the best wonder-child tradition Harry is truly heroic and naturally superior to adults due to his innate sense of right and wrong, his loyalty to his friends, common sense, courage, and sense of duty—real attributes in an increasingly secular, individualistic, and materialistic society. Even though the fictional Harry was brought up in a cruel and unloving environment he is caring and good, reflecting the concept of

destiny, that you are what you are with or without the love and encouragement you deserve. In this sense, Harry represents the romantic ideal of the natural goodness of the child, born without sin to be tested and tempted by the cruel world of adults. Again and again it seems, despite political and social changes, films starring children carry the message that the child makes a better adult and the child star can't help but be caught up in the expectation of perfection. As for the actors in the Harry Potter films, time will tell whether they will live to regret their early success or be grateful for it. Either way, it will almost certainly have been a life, and identity, altering experience.

Recent years have also seen the emergence of a new breed of child star; the media-savvy 'child-adults' who seem unconcerned about the potential pitfalls of early success due to the control they have over their professional and financial lives. The most extreme example of this is the incredible success of the Olsen twins (born 1986) who have been appearing in U.S. sitcoms, kids' shows, and films since they were babies and who were titled 'executive producers' of their own entertainment company, *Dualstar Inc*, at the age of seven. By the time they were thirteen Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen had earned more than Macaulay Culkin and Shirley Temple combined and had saved and invested prudently with the help of their parents and a trusted circle of lawyers and managers.[89] Having launched a huge range of products on the back of their TV personas including Internet sites, dolls, DVDs, CD-ROMs, books, posters, clothing, make-up, and accessories the girls' appeal seemed to lie both in their familiarity (they had after all grown up on television) and their innocent prettiness which made them acceptable role models for pre-teens the world over. The quirkiness of being identical twins also gave them novelty value and especially appealed to the common little girl fantasy of always having a best friend to play with and confide in. Michael Stone, the chairman of the company which produced the girls' clothing line, sums up their continuing success in starkly clinical terms, encapsulating the way in which child stars always seem to end up being reduced to a commodity no matter how 'natural' their appeal seems to be:

> For an entertainment property to be successful over the long term, we believe it has to consistently deliver a fantasy to the core audience. Mary-Kate and Ashley fulfil for girls the fantasy. Girls want to be like Mary-Kate and Ashley.[90]

A journalist writing in 2000 when the girls were thirteen commented that despite their impressive confidence and success: 'Mary-Kate and Ashley probably won't understand fame's impact on their lives until they're adults'[91] and given the tone of Stone's assessment of the twins as an 'entertainment property' it does seem unlikely that, even if they wanted to, they would ever be able to disassociate themselves with the brand-name they have become.

As they have grown into adulthood, the twins have continued to deliver, on screen at least, the fantasy image of perfection that made them so popular

with young girls, and in 2005 they took full control of their billion-dollar media empire. However, Mary-Kate's well-publicised battle with anorexia and her problems with alcohol over the last few years have somewhat sullied the wholesome girls-next-door image which was so fundamental to their initial appeal. It seems that the pressure of having to live up to early success is one element of child stardom which no amount of media-savviness, protective parenting, or prudent financial investment can avoid, and that the thought of growing up and away from a childhood image that has defined you can be a very frightening prospect. Indeed, it is difficult not to interpret Mary-Kate's anorexia as an attempt to stay small and childlike.

The fact that the Olsen twins were packaged and marketed to appeal to children rather than grown-ups sets them rather apart from other child stars whose main audience has traditionally been the amused or moved indulgent adult. That children are now a consumer group in their own right with money to spend on merchandise which connects them to the products and people they like (or at least the pester power to get their parents to buy it for them) probably explains the new breed of child star who is in effect 'from the children, for the children.' However, this shift in audience demographic for some child stars is more an extension of their appeal than a reduction of it. Child stars will always be required whenever there is a need for an idealised image of childhood to be represented on screen, whether that be an adult's ideal of what children should be like or a child's ideal of what they aspire to be like.

ALWAYS DIFFERENT, ALWAYS THE SAME

This chapter has traced the history of children in the entertainment business from the earliest recorded references to child actors in antiquity, through street, stage, and screen performers, up to today's multi-media, globally marketed child stars of film and television. I have described how social concerns over children working as acrobats and actors in Victorian times, coupled with a growing literary tradition of depicting such children as tragic characters and the adults responsible for them as monsters, set in place stereotypes which endure to this day. The way in which Hollywood redefined the child performer as the child star in the early twentieth century by drawing on romantic ideals of special children having angelic qualities was also demonstrated to be an enduring theme in the contemporary appeal of children on screen.

The connection between Elizabethan boy actors, Victorian infant prodigies, and contemporary child film actors may seem tenuous on one level, but the similarities are also clearly identifiable. The overwhelming importance of pleasing an audience, the coercion of some adults, and the concern of others all seem to characterise the experience of being a child performer and always have done. The controversial nature of the term 'child star' derives

from this very polarity of opinion regarding the acceptability of putting a child in front of an audience and allowing judgements to be made on both their performance and their moral character.

Even given these similarities, though, it is undeniable that the role of the child performer changed profoundly over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from small actor to screen angel. The classic child star was thus born from the seemingly perfect marriage of Victorian infant prodigies and vaudeville fairy dolls with the Hollywood star system. The way the child star was reconstructed again for the television age, again for more recent cinematic roles, and yet again to provide lucrative role models for children demonstrates the malleability of the subject and the ongoing demand for child performers in a variety of guises.

The inherent 'differentness' of the performing child from the majority of children, especially in terms of the contradictory association both with precocious sexuality and with innocence and naturalness, underpins and highlights the extreme reactions which child stars seem to elicit.

As emphasised at the start of this chapter, the child star, or even simply the child performer, has never been a neutral category, and the frequent oscillations between adoration and denigration in public attitudes towards them seem to be inconsistent and unpredictable. What does appear to be consistent, however, is the constant objectification and manipulation of the performing child to fulfil adult desires. The consumer of the child defines the child—as true now as it was in Ancient Greece and Elizabethan England.

The next chapter examines how child stars are constructed in the media, and explores the way in which their stigmatized public image serves to reinforce normative standards of childhood.

4   The Powerlessness of Child Stars

Hollywood would save Bosnia before the life of a single child actor.[1]

This chapter locates the discourse surrounding the child star in a social and psychological context by examining both the social construction of the category of the child star and the implications to the identity of individuals whose experiences render them members of such a category. The powerlessness of the individual to break free of the subject position created for himself or herself by the media is a key theme of the analysis and is intended to highlight how control over discourse is a vital source of power and how certain discourses acquire authenticity and constitute the 'truth of the matter' at any given historical moment. The overriding aim of this chapter is to investigate the key question posed in the Introduction as to why it is that child stars are frequently denigrated and ridiculed in the media, and to consider the repercussions of such a construction on the way self-told narratives of former child stars are presented. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first is entitled 'The Construction of the Child Star as Damaged and Transgressive,' and the second is called, 'The Individual Response to Being Stigmatised as a Former Child Star.'

In the first section the language used in newspaper and magazine articles about child stars is examined in order to ascertain the ways in which a certain version of the social reality of being a child star is established and normalised through the media. I begin by demonstrating how the idea of child stars being stigmatised or even cursed has become accepted in modern society through the way such individuals are written about, and I identify the main linguistic and narrative techniques used to achieve this result. I go on to argue that this discourse serves to reinforce wider social rules about the expected and preferred behaviour of children (and, to some extent, parents) and explore historical reasons for the current status of child stars, and particularly former child stars, as objects of ridicule and pity. I explore this issue further by examining the ways in which child stars as a social group are rendered powerless by their position in the categorisation framework which informs our shared system of meaning by drawing on Mary

Douglas's work on pollution and taboo[2] and other theories of transgression. I demonstrate how child stars are conceptualised as anomalies in our culture and as such are subject to controlling techniques which serve to re-establish the social order, yet which do damage to the individual's sense of self and identity.

Having established the culturally constructed phenomenon of the stigmatised child star I go on to consider the impact of such a negative shared social discourse on those individuals whose lives and identities have been directly affected and shaped by it. Through examining the narrative techniques evident in autobiographical accounts and interviews by and with former child stars, I demonstrate how recurrent patterns of explanation and justification are used in an attempt to regain authenticity and neutralise the effects of what Goffman termed as a 'spoiled identity.'[3] Focussing on the self-told stories of Macaulay Culkin, Drew Barrymore, and other high-profile performers, the standard narrative techniques used in accounts of child stardom and its subsequent long-term effects are considered as protective strategies against the overwhelmingly destructive force of the dominant discourse on child stars prevalent in today's media culture.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHILD STAR AS DAMAGED AND TRANSGRESSIVE

The Curse of the Child Star

> Decades after he counselled Mrs Worthington not to put her daughter on the stage, Noel Coward's advice still rings true. In Britain, the life of the pre-pubescent pop star is seldom happy. There's something of the Victorian chimney sweep about their brief careers: heartlessly overworked to capitalise on fleeting success, exposed to the harsh realities of life at a tender age, quickly discarded when the novelty wears off. At best, they can expect an irrevocable plunge into obscurity, unable to escape the burden of their early fame. At worse they suffer a grisly, untimely fate, succumbing to drugs or eating disorders. (*The Guardian*, 10 August 2001)[4]

The idea that there is a curse on child stars which inevitably leads them into disaster in adult life, as so explicitly described in the preceding quote, is a pervasive one in our media culture and is consistently reinforced through sensationalist newspaper headlines such as:

FORMER CHILD ACTOR FACES MURDER CHARGE (re: Skylar Deleon, *www.CNN.com*, 17 August 2005)

CHILD STAR'S SHAME: STONED ALONE, CULKIN ARRESTED AFTER DRUGS FIND (re: Macaulay Culkin, *Glasgow Sunday Mail*, 19 September 2004)

> CHILD STARS REVEAL HOW THEIR DREAMS OF FAME TURNED INTO A NIGHTMARE (*The Sun*, 9 July 2005)

or the ultimate:

> CHILD TV STAR FOUND DEAD (re: Anissa Jones, *New York Daily Times*, 30 August 1976)

Indeed, so unquestioned is it now that child stardom has dangerous and terrible consequences that any other outcome is either ignored, downplayed, or treated with shocked surprise. For example, in an interview with the British actor Todd Carty, who has had a very successful career both as a child and an adult, the journalist seems baffled that:

> There is no evidence that Todd Carty has ever obeyed the customary child star trajectory and gone off the rails. Or have I missed something? (*The Observer*, 8 September 2002)[5]

Similarly, an article on the singer Aled Jones reports his apparent cheerfulness with surprise:

> It is sixteen years since the former child star's voice broke and his fame evaporated. By rights he should be crazy with bitterness, or mildly sour around the edges, but Jones looks pretty pleased with himself. (*The Guardian*, 16 October 2002)[6]

Much more expected are stories which depict former child stars as forlorn, tragic figures whose lives have gone disastrously wrong, such as in this appraisal of Jamie Bell who was the lead actor in the hugely popular film *Billy Elliot*[7] at the age of twelve:

> Vodka binges, lost friends and a broken heart . . . lonely Billy Elliot star five years on. (*The Sun*, 4 February 2005)[8]

The reality that many child actors go on to have happy and productive adult lives (especially if they create a career for themselves outside of show business) and that it is the unfortunate minority who take a more self-destructive path seems to have little bearing on the media construction of the child star and former child star as tormented and cursed individuals. What is particularly interesting is how this way of framing and presenting this specific social group has gained currency and become the current dominant discourse when child stars are discussed in the public realm.

   In order to explore how such a discourse has gained currency and been naturalised in our society and thus unpick this widely accepted truism, it is useful to apply the principles of discourse analysis to articles and interviews

on and about child stars. As Wetherell and Potter explain, one of the key objectives of the deconstruction of text through the analysis of discourse is to explore: 'the arguments and representations which make up the taken for granted in a particular society,'[9] and the supposed curse of the child star certainly appears to be 'taken for granted' in the vast majority of articles examined for this study.

For example, comments and warnings about the perils of child stardom such as those quoted next are a stock beginning to reports about newly famous child actors and singers and work to naturalise the association of early fame with extreme danger:

> Who wouldn't want to be plucked from obscurity, made into a star by one of the world's leading directors and given, apparently, the world at their feet? Anyone who's smart that's who. (*The Guardian*, 23 May 2000)[10]

> The horror stories of young actors whose childhoods end in parental estrangement, drug addiction or suicide are enough to terrify any sensible parent into giving stage and screen a wide berth. (*The Guardian*, 22 November 2000)[11]

> Child stars do not get a good press . . . stories of pushy parents, lost childhoods and damaged adults abound. It makes you grateful to have a thoroughly mediocre, bog-standard kid whose chief talent is an encyclopaedic knowledge of The Simpsons. (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2002)[12]

> Most child actors struggle to find meaningful lives as adults. (*The Times*, 28 July 2005)[13]

The preceding rhetorical questions and assertions are clearly designed to appeal to traditional middle-class views concerning child-rearing. Within this set of values 'sensible parents' do not allow their children to become involved in the potential 'horror stories' of child stardom and there is an implicit agreement that having 'mediocre,' normal kids is by far preferable to having a precociously famous and therefore automatically 'damaged' child. This default definition of child stars as being the product of working-class, rather than middle-class, families who put the acquisition of fame and fortune before the welfare of their child is an important element of the overall construction of child stars as both deviant and powerless and therefore deserving any cursed bad luck which befalls them.

This message that the child star will be cursed in adult life is reinforced and naturalised in articles about child stars in a range of subtle and not-so-subtle ways. For instance, there is the ubiquitous and continual use of the term 'child star' (as in this book also) for each and every child who has had any degree of success or exposure in the entertainment industry. Clearly, to be automatically elevated to the exalted position of a 'star' when still a child with all the expectation and baggage which that entails almost guarantees failure as an adult. Simply to grow up, with the inherent changes to voice

and face that involves, moves the individual further and further away from their childhood 'star' self——and there is, of course, an awfully long way to fall from being a 'star.' The following wistful comment is typical of the lament of the loss of the naive charm of child stars in articles which go on to relish the exploits of those who found fame at a young age:

> If only Hollywood kids didn't have to grow up and could always just remain innocent stars. (*The Guardian*, 30 July 2005)[14]

Another technique used to reinforce the concept of a curse is that of referencing the fanciful superstitious belief that good or lucky experiences have to be equalled out with bad or unlucky experiences. For example:

> They wanted stardom, now they've got to pay for it——in karmic coin. (*The Guardian*, 30 July 2005)[15]

Indeed, one of the strongest themes to come from a reading of these stories is that they seem to be part of a wider accepted 'truism' that too much success too young is damaging and is, paradoxically, actually the antithesis of good luck. This would appear to be part of the Protestant work ethic which dominates the attitude to economic life in large parts of Western society. This concept reinforces the belief that hard work over a substantial period of time is the only morally acceptable way to achieve financial security and success. Furthermore, it is the only way in which, once achieved, it is possible to relax and enjoy it, in the full knowledge that the 'price' for success has been paid up front in terms of hours worked and sacrifices made. For this reason the economic success of child stars may be one of the reasons they can so easily be held up as objects of scorn and derision in the media and why there seems to be such a feeling of schadenfreude about their downfalls.

   The attribution of all and any ills which befall former child stars to their early success whilst ignoring any other factors which may have contributed to their misfortune is another common technique used to reinforce the idea that there is a curse on child stars, and further naturalises the idea that there is a direct cause–effect correlation between child stardom and adult disaster. This is evident in the following extracts in which automatic associations are made between child stardom and a whole range of possibly unrelated problems later in life:

> Freckle-faced actor who bunked off his A-levels, lived in a squat and then caught hepatitis on the hippy trail. How starring in Mary Poppins led to the death of the supercalifragilistic boy. (*Mail on Sunday*, 24 October 2004)[16]

> It was a classic case of too much too young. At Dundee sheriff court yesterday, the former child star of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, now an eco-warrior, faced down her family's bid to evict her from her home . . . Following in the long line of children scarred by success in Hollywood, Heather Ripley, 39,

found herself in court, trying to hold on to the villa she rents from a trust fund set up by her grandfather. (*The Guardian*, 10 August 1999)[17]

Lena Zavaroni, who has died aged 34, epitomised the potentially traumatic effects of child stardom. (*The Guardian*, 5 October 1999)[18]

After the success of Pass the Dutchie, Patrick Waite, 15, from Musical Youth, had a nervous breakdown, turned to drugs and eventually died at the age of 24 from a head injury while serving time in jail. (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 24 October 1999)[19]

Coleman, now 34, earned an estimated $18million as the star of that top-rated sitcom, but had been reduced to working as a $7 an hour movie set security guard a few years ago. (*www.abcnews.com*, 3 September 2002)[20]

The preceding quotes encourage us to feel pity for former child stars by emphasising their powerlessness in the 'adult' world in contrast to the 'illicit' power they had as children. Again the message is clearly that early success is dangerous, and such stories serve as thinly veiled warnings as to the consequences of having 'too much too young.'

The specific vocabulary employed to describe child stars also works to create a sense of impending doom for those who enter the world of child stardom. For example, the use of the terms 'survivors' and 'casualties' in the following extracts implies that child stardom is a danger to life and limb:

Musical Youth were the pop phenomenon of 1982, a group of five British children who sold millions of records and became the first black group to appear on MTV. Soon though their success began to unravel . . . The band's survivors talk to Alex Petridis. (*The Guardian*, 21 March 2003)[21]

The road of the child pop star is littered with casualties——will S Club 8, current top of the tots, be different? (Guardian Weekend, 27 September 2003)[22]

Unfortunately, what has often gone with child stardom is adult self-destruction. The latest casualty is Danny Bonaduce, once of the Partridge Family, who was fired from his job as a LA radio host last month after yet another trip to rehab. (*The Times*, 28 July 2005)[23]

The implication in these pieces that show business is a battleground where only the toughest survive highlights the inappropriateness of children being there and characterises those that are as victims who are part of a hostile environment which they are ill prepared to deal with.

In order to ensure that the depiction of the former child star as a cursed victim of early success is the dominant cultural image of this group, certain infamous 'horror stories' are told again and again in the press which create the impression that death and disaster amongst those that found success early in life is much more widespread than is actually the case.

To this end, selective mini-biographies of child stars who have had miserable experiences are often referred to as 'proof' that the curse is real. For example this extract is taken from an article about Robert Iler, a young American actor, after he had been arrested for his role in a robbery in Manhattan and is entitled 'Oh no——not another one':

> American TV will make a good kid bad in no time flat. Take Butch Patrick, who played Eddie Munster. He racked up a hefty rap sheet as a juvenile delinquent before straightening himself out. Or child star Patty Duke, whose adult life has been filled with drug abuse. Then we had Mackenzie Phillips . . . who was a hot-headed drug-abuser during her sojourn on the 1970s sitcom *One Day at a Time*, and Danny Bonaduce, whose clean-cut image as the Partridge Family's freckled ginger-haired drummer was tarnished after coke busts, and particularly after he beat up a transvestite hooker in a New York alleyway. No fewer than three child stars sank either into ignominy or an early grave on the family values sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*. (*The Guardian*, 13 July 2001)[24]

Given the unquestionably awful stories about some former child stars, it seems that a generalisation has occurred which has become the stock stereotype of this group and which has become naturalised and accepted as 'common sense' knowledge. As Hamilton and Trolier[25] found in their research into prejudice and discrimination, due to limits to our cognitive processing capacity, social information is generally organised and simplified around a set of cognitive categories and thus; 'social categories quickly become a focus for an associated baggage of beliefs, thoughts and value judgements about the people within the category.'[26]

The preceding analysis has identified the main techniques by which newspaper articles facilitate and perpetuate a certain image of the child star as powerless, pitiful, and cursed which can be understood as the cultural expression of the 'beliefs, thoughts, and judgements' which surround this social group. In summary, then, these techniques are:

1. The sensationalist reporting of the misdemeanours of former child stars.
2. The 'shocked surprise' reactions to former child stars who have not had negative experiences in adult life.
3. The framing of child stardom as a perilous experience from which 'sensible' (i.e., middle-class) parents keep their children away.
4. The extensive and indiscriminate use of the hyperbolic term 'child star.'
5. The arbitrary references to the superstitious belief that success must be 'paid for' either by hard work or bad luck.
6. The attribution of all negative adult experiences in a former child star's life to their early success.

7. The use of specific vocabulary which identifies child stars as power-
   less victims.
8. The re-telling of stories which embody the image of the 'child star
   gone wrong' on which the whole discourse is based.

It seems clear that the value judgements around child stars are overwhelm-
ingly negative and that their lives and experiences are reduced in newspaper
articles in order to fit in with the well-established image of the child star
which we expect and feel comfortable with. Such stereotyping can of course
become self-perpetuating—for as Hamilton and Trolier note, instances of
behaviour which confirm to the stereotype will be more memorable than
disconfirming instances, and this is clear from the selective reporting of
'shocking' former child star stories evident in the press.

However, useful though Hamilton and Trolier's ideas are in explaining
how the stereotype of the cursed child star is normalised and naturalised in
the media, social cognition research such as theirs cannot account for the
importance of analysing the history of ideas and categorisation in under-
standing the ideology which underpins social discourse.

Indeed, when contemporary media stories about child stars are compared
with those of fifty and a hundred years ago it becomes evident that today's
construction is both the product of the past and a reaction against it. The
idea of the cursed child star is by no means universal or 'natural' despite the
strong normalising influence of the current dominant discourse. Rather, the
concept that early success in show business has damning consequences has
a history that is firmly attached to wider shifting attitudes towards children
and childhood and to the extraordinary developments in media and technol-
ogy over the twentieth century.

If we look at Victorian publications such as *Interlude* or *The Music Hall
and Theatre* which include interviews and feature articles on a wide variety
of actors, singers, and miscellaneous entertainers who appeared on stage
across Britain and America at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of
the twentieth century, a very different attitude towards child performers is
evident. Instead of viewing early success as a precursor to disaster in adult-
hood, it seems that the Victorian stance was rather more encouraging, with
adult success in the theatre seen as a reward for hard work during child-
hood. For example, the front page of the weekly published *Interlude* always
highlighted a popular performer and gave a biography of their rise to suc-
cess. From these texts it is clear that being a child performer was seen as an
almost essential precursor to a life on the stage. For example, the following
extract from 1886 on the singer Miss Florrie Robina praises her 'persistent
effort' and celebrates her hard-won 'unbounded success':

> In professional, as in all other phases of life, success is only attained after a
> long and weary struggle . . . In the case of Miss Robina, it has been only after
> years of toil and persistent effort that she has attained her present position.

> At the early age of five years she first trod the boards at Thornton's Varieties, Leeds . . . During her provincial tour she was booked for a return visit wherever she played and in the Metropolis also her success has been most decided. (*Interlude*, 16 January 1886)

A similar admiration of youthful courage and perseverance is evident in a feature on the dancer and singer Miss Alice Conway:

> Her first appearance before the public was made when she was but eight years of age, on the boards of the old Grecian Theatre, London. At the age of fifteen she had so developed her talent for dancing, that she, with a pluck and precocity beyond her years, took in hand, and in a perfectly capable way, taught a ballet at the Theatre Royal, Greenwich . . . We have little doubt that Miss Conway will have a very prosperous future, for she shows an amount of originality that, sooner or later, is bound to win for her a very prominent place in the regard of the general public. (*Interlude*, 27 February 1886)

That Miss Conway could look forward to an attitude of high regard of the general public is in stark contrast to the ridicule and pity many of today's former child stars endure when they attempt to continue their careers into adulthood. It is also interesting to note that Conway's 'pluck and precocity beyond her years' is cast here as a positive attribute, whereby any precocity in childhood is currently seen as generally unpleasant, threatening as it does the carefully constructed boundaries that we have set up around childhood in the period between then and now. Indeed, it would seem that the idea of the curse of the child star only makes sense in our contemporary social context in which childhood is idealised as a protected space under adult control and regulation. In the Victorian era, although such social values were already fairly well established in middle-class homes, they were certainly not seen as applicable to all children regardless of class and social position. That is to say, 'childhood' as a socially constructed category was still in the process of becoming universalised and as such there was much more flexibility in the range of childhoods which were both available and acceptable. The very idea of being 'damaged' by one's childhood experiences was, pre-Freud, also a largely non-existent concept in Victorian society and so it is perhaps not surprising that this discourse was not drawn on in their descriptions of the lives of former child performers.

As described in a previous chapter, with the focus on child welfare and education and the idealisation of childhood which grew and grew throughout the twentieth century——the so-called century of the child—social attitudes towards child performers also changed and developed. The angelic cinemoppets of 1920s–1940s Hollywood were not seen as cursed, but blessed. The child star became the embodiment of the perfect child, the visual evidence of the symbolic value of innocence and purity which could so easily be pinned on to a child's image. There was no hint of a curse for

these children; if anything theirs was predicted to be a charmed life, as in this quite extraordinary celebration of child star Margaret O'Brien from *Photoplay* magazine in 1943:

> A miniature acting genius, she is still a small-fry representative who wears two smooth, brown braids down her back, draws pictures by following with a pencil the numbers from one to two to three and loves to play a screen role that "chokes her throat". . . Margaret is just six . . . Her tiny face is ethereal in its glowing sensitiveness. Her gestures, especially when she speaks of the play she's writing—well, printing—well, just "making up" as she finally amends with her two small arms circling gracefully in the air—bespeak the artist that Margaret will one day become.[27]

However, as the disastrous private lives of stars such as Jackie Coogan and Judy Garland became public knowledge, and the first generation of child TV stars in America had their fair share of drug abuse and scandal in the 1960s, the child star was suddenly seen as an oddity and a misfit who challenged not only escapist fantasies of the magical world of movies and TV, but also the carefully constructed image of the innocent and obedient family-centred child which had become so ubiquitous in post-war Britain and America.

Thus the myth of the curse of child stardom began to gain currency as it reinforced both the ideal of childhood as a private, family-oriented time of life separate from the adult world of work and responsibility, and also the concept of there being a right and a wrong kind of childhood, with transgressions into adult territory being punishable by the loss of the protection that the veneer of childhood innocence provides. In this sense the 'curse' serves to reinforce our current dominant beliefs and values about childhood and can also be seen as a reaction against the more generalised fear that children today are becoming too powerful, too knowing, and are growing up too fast. In order to preserve our nostalgic vision of childhood as a time of innocence and preternatural wisdom, those who step across the boundaries of childhood are dealt with harshly, and child stars are no exception. Indeed, other than perhaps royal children or children who commit, or are victims of, heinous crimes or battle terrible diseases against the odds, the only children who really enter our adult mainstream media are child stars. Our treatment of them in the media, therefore, demonstrates much about the status of childhood more generally in our society. The shared consensus that child stars are damned from the start indicates an underlying confusion about what we want children to do and be, and a determination to exercise the power that we, as adults, have over them and which it is in our interests to protect.

However, although the idea that successful child performers are cursed in adult life is a dominant one in the current discourse which constructs the category of the 'child star,' there appear to be certain exceptions to the rule which challenge the strength and 'taken for grantedness' of this concept.

For example, children who demonstrate great sporting talent or who are gifted classical musicians tend not to be publicly endowed with the same 'curse.' Nor do children who are taking only their first steps towards success and whose accomplishments are documented by their local newspapers. In such cases, as illustrated here, these youngsters' achievements are celebrated rather than derided, with articles focussing only on the positive aspects of the experiences for their local lads or lasses:

> It must be the dream of every child who aspires to an acting career to star in a television drama that everyone is talking about. For Radlett schoolgirl Emily Cantor-Davis the dream has come true. (*The Borehamwood Times*, 24 April 2002)[28]

> More than 12 million television viewers rode a rollercoaster of emotions on Sunday night all thanks to child star Nick Robinson who shone as Willie Beech in the heart-wrenching *Goodnight Mister Tom*. (*The Hendon Times*, 31 October 1998)[29]

> A talented youngster from Walthamstow is set to star at the Palace Theatre in the smash hit musical *Les Miserables*. Luke Marson, 12, of Salop Road, Walthamstow, will play the role of Gavorche, the child lead. (*The Walthamstow Times*, 12 July 2001)[30]

> A budding child star is jumping for joy after landing a role in the latest Andrew Lloyd Webber production. Eight-year old Tosh Wanogho . . . was one of 20 children picked from 350 entrants to perform in *Whistle Down the Wind*. (*The Wandsworth Guardian*, 18 April 1998)[31]

Even the possibility of being catapulted into mega stardom is seen as a completely risk-free adventure, as evident in the following quote from a local Edinburgh newspaper about the open auditions that were held in the city to find the lead child star for the film of *Grey Friars Bobby*:

> A spokeswoman for Scottish Screen, which has committed £500,000 of lottery money to the film's £5 million budget, said it was a great opportunity for an unknown child to become a household name. 'Look what happened to Macaulay Culkin in *Home Alone*,' she said. 'These open auditions give children a huge chance to become involved in the film industry, and who knows where it might lead.' (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 24 October 2002)[32]

This rather different attitude towards child stars in local newspapers seems to indicate that the child who is still on the margins of success or is involved in more local-based entertainment projects is still subject to the protection and encouragement which is seen as appropriate for 'normal' children. As the child moves away from the private, family realm and into the public domain with increasing popularity and success such niceties

seem to disappear. As the child star creates a position for him/herself in the wider society their threat to the rules governing the rightful place of children becomes evident, and the power of the media to cast a lifelong shadow on their lives is activated.

Another example of child stars who seem to have so far avoided, or at least been predicted to avoid, the 'curse' in adult life by the national press are the stars of the phenomenally successful *Harry Potter*[33] films based on the best-selling novels by author J.K. Rowling. The saving graces of the three main characters played by Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, and Emma Watson seem to be more about being 'naturals' with 'supportive parents' than about avoiding success and celebrity altogether. Analysed in more detail it becomes apparent that there is another element to the supposed universal curse of the child star which has more to do with social class than cosmic justice. As Walkerdine[34] observed in her study of the representations of little girls in film, the aspirational power of a life in show business for poorly educated working class children—girls especially—is immense, and the fact that child stars have historically been associated with the working class goes some way to explaining why they are held in low esteem by society at large.

In a thinly disguised contempt of this supposedly predominantly working-class aspiration to escape a mediocre life by 'making it' in show business, Chris Columbus and John Boorman, the directors of the *Harry Potter* films were, we are told, 'determined to avoid seeing the usual line-up of tap-dancing hopefuls.'[35] In fact Daniel Radcliffe, who plays Harry, was only cast following 'a chance encounter' with Columbus at a West End film premier with his literary agent father and casting director mother. A meeting which surely could have happened to any ten-year-old . . .

Boorman's description of Daniel as a 'lovely kid' with a 'natural manner' distances him from the stereotypical precocious child star, and as a final defence against the 'curse' Daniel's mother and father are clearly demarcated from the pushy parents of the working class wannabes who will stop at nothing to get their child in front of the camera:

> The most important thing when you're casting children is to make sure you cast the parents, and his parents are excellent people. They're aware of the pressures but they're also very protective, without being pushy. I like them very much. (*The Guardian*, 22 August 2000)[36]

This subtle approval of discretion and modesty in child stars and their families can be seen as a modern-day expression of the cult of naturalness which has characterised desirable performances by children since the Victorian era and which is explored in more detail in the next chapter in terms of its relation to ideal tenets of childhood.

So it seems that not being too successful and/or being middle-class may offer some protection from being branded a 'has-been' as an adult, although

only time will tell if the public admiration for the child stars of the *Harry Potter* films will turn sour or not as they grow up and away from the roles which made them famous.

This section of analysis has described how a stereotyped convention of the lives of child stars has been created through the way in which the press structures and frames stories about such individuals. I have argued that by perpetuating the myth that there is a 'curse' on the future happiness of child stars, the media works to reinforce shared normative standards relating to the behaviour and experiences that are acceptable for children. In this way the stories serve to protect the ideal of childhood as a special, protected place for all children, which, if left too early, will have devastating consequences for those concerned. I have also noted several exceptions to the cursed child star rule which challenge the strength of the concept which, as we will see in the next section, has been so powerful in shaping people's expectations of child stars and has often reduced their lives to a set of narrative conventions from which the individual struggles to escape.

Next, I explore in more detail the kinds of behaviours which count as transgressions against childhood as evident in the stories analysed, and I examine some theoretical explanations as to why the very category 'child star' is inherently challenging to the formal structure of our society.

Transgression and Punishment

Although the preceding analysis describes how child stars are stereotyped in the print media as being somehow damaged or cursed by their early success, it does not satisfactorily address the question of why this social group should be castigated in such a way. In order to explain this issue there has to be an understanding of why contemporary child stars generate such negative reactions in the media and what exactly it is about them which apparently so offends the sensibilities of the general public.

This section redresses that balance by examining the fundamentally transgressive status of the child star in relation to the specific classification system on which our culture is based. Using Douglas's theory of pollution and taboo,[37] I demonstrate the anomalous and therefore dangerous social status of child stars, and explore the sanctions used to punish such individuals who are conceptualised as a threat to the social order.

With reference to the work of Van Gennep[38] and Turner[39] I go on to explain how child stars also challenge the conventional rites of passage which are an intrinsic element of the journey into adulthood in all cultures and thus set themselves up as permanently stigmatised individuals.

Although Douglas and Van Gennep derived their theories from structuralist anthropological fieldwork and so may appear somewhat incongruous with the overall approach of discourse analysis which characterises this chapter, their work is actually extremely relevant to understanding why child stars are constructed as powerless in our culture. The universal social

classification methods described by such anthropologists provide useful tools in identifying culturally and historically specific categorisations into which social groups are defined as anomalous and why at certain times and in certain places. By conceptualising the 'child star' as a distinct category within a whole system of meaning in this way it is possible to identify the cultural boundaries which define and confine the group and to describe the discursive formations through which the child star is constructed as deviant. As such, anthropological readings of contemporary data can offer important insights into how dominant discourses are reinforced through media texts which are embedded with cultural meanings and shared values.

The Child Star and the Boundaries of Childhood

Jenks defines transgression as 'that conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries'[40] and explains how transgressive acts serve to reaffirm the social order by confirming that limits are in place and by delineating where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour lie.

Child stars are then in an exalted 'adult' position, transgressing the boundaries of childhood in our society, and through that transgression they function to confirm the shared consensus as to where the boundaries of childhood should be. The difference of child stars to 'normal' children can thus be understood as the essence of both their power as icons of the potentiality of childhood and, more relevantly for this chapter, their powerlessness as transgressive persons who have disturbed the social order. The historical association of 'normal' with morally 'good' renders those who deviate from the 'normal' as going against the established moral order, and this fundamental tainting of child stars due to their 'abnormal' status has traditionally called for some kind of social punishment to be administered. As Douglas asserts, the harsh treatment of transgressors is a vital part of the protection of the whole community, be it primitive or modern:

> When the community is attacked from outside at least the external danger fosters solidarity within. When it is attacked from within by wanton individuals, they can be punished and the structure publicly affirmed.[41]

As demonstrated in the preceding section the punishment meted out to those 'wanton' transgressors of childhood, child stars, is to be 'cursed' in adult life. Whether or not this is actually the case (and one would assume that most people in Western society would not really believe that it is) what is important is that there appears to be a punishment of these transgressors, and even more importantly that there is a shared affirmation as to the rightness of such a punishment being both acceptable and predictable for such individuals. In this sense the transgression of the child star is used in their media constructions to justify and explain any bad experiences in later life which then become defined as punishments for their earlier transgressions.

The 'child star' then becomes a dangerous category in terms of its relation to the boundaries of social order. Indeed, if we accept that meaning is created through opposites—i.e. that which *is* defines that which *is not* and vice versa—then the term 'child star' can be seen to derive its meaning from its distinction both from 'adult star' and simply 'child.' In relation to the reinforcement and recreation of the category 'child' it would appear that child stars are defined by their difference to 'normal' children, thus emphasising what is consensually agreed to be acceptable and therefore 'natural' behaviour for children. It follows then that the behaviour of child stars which is selected to appear in media stories is of the most shocking kind, generally involving either precocious sexuality or drug abuse, which serves to further alienate the child star from the 'normal' child. For example, the members of failed pre-teen pop group Breze caused outrage in the press in the late 1990s because of the way their appearance was sexualised by a misguided management team:

> They sing provocatively, wear make-up and tattoos—and are aged between nine and eleven . . . Although the band is energetic and enthusiastic, the girls have been filmed swaying their underdeveloped hips in an effort to appear sexy. (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 24 October 1999)[42]

and Charlotte Church shocked her former fans when:

> she was pictured holidaying in Hawaii wearing a T-shirt bearing the offensive slogan 'Barbie is a crack whore'. (*Mail on Sunday*, 4 May 2003)[43]

Drug abuse is also something that 'normal' children do not become involved in. The following quotes about Drew Barrymore highlight the incredulity surrounding her behaviour and lament the corrupting influence of fame on childhood innocence:

> [Drew] was arrested in the show's third season for cocaine possession. Left and returned several times. Fell asleep during rehearsals, refused to take drug tests, and reportedly appeared incoherent at points . . . [she] entered a rehab clinic at the age of 13 to fight drug and alcohol abuse. In one episode, she swiped her mother's credit card and hopped on a plane to the West Coast with the intention of continuing on to Hawaii. She was apprehended by private investigators in Los Angeles and led back to rehab in handcuffs. (*www.abcnews.com*, 3 September 2002)[44]

> [She] was smoking grass at 10, addicted to cocaine at 13, and went from child parts to trashy movies like Poison Ivy. (*The Observer*, 1 October 2000)[45]

Other criminal or outlandish behaviour by child stars also gets highlighted in the press as further evidence of the dangers of achieving too much too young:

[Macaulay Culkin] sued his father, scrawled graffiti in his New York apartment, and dyed his hair blue. (*www.abcnews.com*, 3 September 2002)[46]

Pity poor Robert Iler . . . He was arrested last week for his (allegedly passive) role in the robbery of two Brazilian tourists in Manhattan. If found guilty, Iler may soon join the ranks of American child stars who made it big and blew it. (*The Guardian*, 13 July 2001)[47]

What does this tell us about the boundaries of acceptable behaviour of children in our society? At face value, nothing very surprising; they shouldn't drink alcohol or take drugs, they shouldn't steal, they shouldn't behave in a 'sexy' way, they shouldn't go against their parents' authority, they shouldn't display any 'unnatural' additions or changes to their bodies. Yet the sensationalised reporting can be seen as symptomatic of wider fears about children out of control, who are beyond adult authority and are therefore a dangerous challenge to the status quo and a threat to adult authority. It is little wonder such children are vilified, highlighting as they do latent weaknesses in our social order and potential deformities in our methods of socialisation.

Hand in hand with the reinforcement of collective ideals as to approvable conduct of children in general go the social consequences for this group of children of having such behaviour publicly exposed. These are, in essence, transgressive behaviours which expel the proponent from the category of 'child' and thus from the protection which membership of that category grants—the individual is thus stigmatised because he or she has been seen to blatantly discard the innocence which is so fundamental to our current construction of the child.

However, as referred to previously, the concept of transgression in relation to child stars is not just relevant in terms of the deviant behaviour of a few such children off screen. It also describes the very status of being a child star—effectively a child who has crossed the fundamental line between childhood and adulthood by working, being economically independent, and having a career without having reached adulthood either chronologically or having passed through the liminal stage of adolescence. Such a position cannot be held to be deviant in the same way as, say, a child taking drugs is, and yet it is a transgression of a crucial social boundary in our society and as such renders the transgressor in a dangerous zone of ambiguity somewhere between childhood and adulthood.

The next chapter considers in detail the status of ambiguous beings such as child stars on a psychoanalytic level, but for the purposes of this chapter the discussion is limited to ideas of social transgression and polluted persons and considers how child stars fall into such a category, and how, if ever, they escape.

As previously explained, in order to gain a wider perspective on the ways in which societies protect their boundaries by categorisation and shared

normative standards it is useful to consider anthropological approaches to the concept of transgression. In her analysis of universal concepts of pollution and taboo as evident in primitive and modern societies Douglas concludes that:

> Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces . . . [therefore] we find in any culture . . . various provision for dealing with ambiguous or anomalous events.[48]

Douglas lists the five most common ways in which anomalous events are dealt with in both primitive and modern societies: (a) by labelling an event (for example a monstrous birth) as of a peculiar kind, thus restoring categories of normality; (b) by physically controlling the anomaly (for example, the practice in some primitive societies of killing twins at birth); (c) by having a rule of avoiding anomalous things, thereby strengthening the definitions to which they do not conform; (d) by labelling anomalous events as dangerous, thereby putting the subject beyond dispute and helping to enforce conformity; and (e) by using ambiguous symbols in ritual for the same ends as they are used in poetry and mythology—to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence. She goes on to explain that all societies are subject to the same rules, although in primitive cultures they work with a greater force and total comprehensiveness, whereas in modern societies they tend to apply to 'disjointed, separate areas of existence.'[49]

In this sense, then, it would seem that the child star could be described as an 'anomalous event' in the scheme of normalised parent–child relations in our society, and that as such is subject to some of the interpretations just outlined, which are intended to restore and return social order by either castigating or celebrating the identified anomaly. For example, child stars are frequently characterised as 'peculiar'(a) due to their unusual experiences in childhood which take them beyond the expected realms of home and school, and dangerous (d) in terms of both their association with precocious sexuality and their apparent vulnerability to addiction and disaster in adult life. Thus potentially we can conceptualise child stars as occupying one of the disjointed, separate areas of existence to which such rules still apply in modern society and therefore understand more clearly the reason they are subject to such undermining stereotyping and derision in the media, as well as being reified and celebrated for their talents and 'specialness.'

According to Douglas, all societies have sanctions for those polluting persons who cross physical or social lines which must be respected according to shared normative standards, and the enforcement of these sanctions, in whatever form they may take, protects the social order. Therefore, it is not possible to interpret pollution rules in isolation and without reference to the wider culture they emanate from, because:

the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought whose key-stone, boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation.[50]

This would suggest that it is only possible to understand why child stars are treated as they are in the media by examining wider norms relating to adulthood and childhood in our culture, and the social boundaries which separate the two.

Also writing from an anthropological perspective, Van Gennep considers the symbolic concept of boundary to be central to human and social experience. He asserts that due to the emotional and practical difficulties associated with movement across boundaries they can only properly be crossed by passing through 'transitional states' which are always, at some level, about death and rebirth, such as the adolescent rites de passage. Transitions are by default transgressive as they are always a step into the unknown and away from the boundaries of the old life. Van Gennep claims that transitional states are also fraught with danger because:

> transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time, and then publicly declares his entry to his new status.[51]

So, the child star finds himself or herself in a state outside of the formal structure which is 'indefinable' and which is dangerous not only for their own identity and survival but also for the identities of others. If a child is supporting their entire family through their earnings, where does that leave the status of their parents? If a child has a manager, a stylist, and an agent to advise him or her, what place is there for the authority of their parents? If a child already has a successful career, where is the need for education? If a child has automatically been granted the status of an adult, what does that say about the necessity of the transitional state of adolescence? Fundamentally, if a child can *be* an adult, what does that say about the 'natural' right of power over children that adults have bestowed upon themselves? Seen in this light, the child star is a dangerous person indeed, challenging the intrinsic legitimacy of the balance of power in our society. There is no way such children can be allowed to 'get away' with that! If they have missed out on the rite of passage to adulthood the first time round, then they had better prove they have made amends for that by going through some kind of identity crisis or publicly shared trauma in later years if they want to be accepted as full members of society.

This can be seen as the 'marginal period' which Douglas describes as an essential part of the rehabilitation process for those on the outskirts of society, such as ex-prisoners, but which also seems relevant for former child

stars, who find themselves in a social wilderness as adults, (or who at least are perceived as being in a social wilderness by the wider society due to media manipulation of their stories):

> During the marginal period which separates ritual dying and ritual rebirth, the novices in initiation are temporarily outcast. For the duration of the rite they have no place in society.[52]

Turner calls this 'in-between' stage 'liminality' and describes it as similar to being in a tunnel with its hidden nature and mysterious darkness. The individual liminar who is travelling through this stage is marked out by their ambiguity whereby, as Jenks describes: 'Their image is hazy, they occupy a cultural miasma rather than any identifiable class or fixed position. They are, in the well worn phrase, "neither one thing nor t'other"'.[53]

   The media fascination with the child star who occupies the liminal zone between childhood and adulthood is demonstrated in this newspaper profile of the British child actor Hayley Mills from the 1960s:

> There is still a lot of child left in her face, but the woman in her is beginning to take over. Her lips have taken on a fullness that wasn't there last summer. She has learned a few five-dollar swear words, but her voice, like some nostalgic echo, occasionally returns to the fifth form and the sound of playgrounds. She can handle the kind of drink you need a licence to sell. She smokes. (*Daily Express*, 13 January 1966)[54]

It is this ambiguity within the symbolic system of meaning, rather than being outside of meaning altogether, which characterises the child star's status as being forever caught between childhood and adulthood, as encapsulated in the following quote:

> Nearly 20 years after first bursting into the charts, pop recluse Roddy Frame is still trying to shake off his 'boy wonder' tag. (*The Sun*, 22 August 2002)[55]

It is clearly within the interest of the media to perpetuate this ambiguity as those who defy the 'natural' order are in general much more interesting than those who adhere to the 'rules,' and those that fall between childhood and adulthood hold a particular fascination for a culture in which the boundaries between these states are constantly being challenged and rewritten. The irony of the preceding quote in pitying Frame for not being able to 'shake off' his 'boy wonder' tag even after a long period of marginality as a 'recluse,' whilst at the same time reinforcing and reawakening the label for a whole new generation of potential fans demonstrates perfectly the powerlessness of the child star to control his or her public image. Once a child star, it seems, always a child star.

The next part of this chapter explores the lifelong stigma attached to having been a child star and the powerlessness of the individual to fully break free of the transgressive identity afforded them. As will be seen, concepts of marginality and liminality are key themes in the ways in which former child stars describe and justify their experiences and attempt to claim the transition into wisdom which comes with the status of full adulthood. I demonstrate how supposed primitive beliefs in the attribution of misfortune to breaches of social norms are powerful features of the self-narratives of this group. This suggests that the idea of the 'curse of the child star,' as constructed by the media, has also been internalised by those labelled as such and that the knowledge that one is perceived to have missed out or skipped a vital transitional stage can have powerful repercussions on the personal and social identity constructions of individuals.

THE INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE TO BEING STIGMATISED AS A FORMER CHILD STAR

The aim of this chapter so far has been to explore the ways in which the media creates a stereotypical identity for child stars and former child stars which limits and defines them socially, professionally, and personally and which they are powerless to control. The process by which such a negative image is normalised and naturalised through the ways that child stars and former child stars are written about and commented on in the press has been demonstrated and is characterised by the reductionist idea of there being a curse on child stars. This idea has been explained as a form of social punishment for the dual transgressions of stepping over the accepted boundaries of childhood and for growing up and away from the ideal image of childhood that they once embodied.

Having established the culturally specific construction of the child star as a transgressive and ambiguous category, the remainder of this chapter examines the response of the individuals who fall into this category to such a potentially damaging definition of their identity. Through an analysis of autobiographies and interviews with former child stars gleaned from a variety of sources, it has been possible to discern certain techniques and patterns in the way they describe and explain their experiences which can be understood as a direct response to the challenge to their identity posed by the stereotypical image of the child star. Reflection on the discourses which this group tend to draw on in the reconstruction of their life narratives allows us to explore how and why they are saying what they are saying in relation to the wider social and cultural context. This linking of quintessentially psychological activities such as justification, rationalisation, and attribution with collective forms of social action, thus generates the potential to integrate psychological concerns with social analysis. As

is demonstrated hereafter, such an approach is extremely useful in understanding the interface between the lived experience of being a child star/former child star and the stereotypical concept of the child star, which has enough 'practical adequacy' to have become an established shorthand for how such individuals are regarded and treated.

It is this gap between a person's social identity and their individual identity which Goffman explored in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*,[56] themes from which are used to structure the following analysis. Goffman's central thesis is that stigma is intimately related with stereotype, and that the way stigmatised individuals are responded to by others is concerned mainly with the individual's deviance from the norm and not with other aspects of his or her life or personality.

Although not stigmatised in a commonly understood way, such as through disfigurement or criminal behaviour, I consider that this focus on the unusual aspect of an individual in informing response is an overriding characteristic of the experience of the child star, and as such renders being a former child star a stigma and thus creates a need for strategies of acceptance to be employed. Just as the individual who has suffered from mental illness has to deal with the stigma of having been in a psychiatric hospital, the former child star has to deal with the stigma of having been a famous and successful youngster.

Beginning with an exploration of the effect of stigma on social identity in relation to the child star, I go on to examine strategies of information control and how group alignment and self-identity is achieved in the interviews and autobiographical accounts analysed.

Stigma and Social Identity

The stark reality of constantly living with the stigma of being a former child star and the powerlessness felt in the face of the situation is eloquently explained in the following quotes. The first is from an interview with Macaulay Culkin, and the second from Gary Coleman:

> I wanted people to forget that that whole thing had ever happened. So I could finally walk down the street and buy a bunch of bananas. Or something like that. Because that was something I could not do without someone looking, or someone taking a picture, or somebody reminding me of what was happening. Or what did happen.[57]

> There's nothing I can do—it's public domain. People have the right under the federal government to joke about me or my situation or my name or anything about me. I can't stop that.[58]

According to Goffman, this shameful gap between virtual and actual social identity, that is to say between the way in which one wants to be perceived

and the way in which one is actually perceived, constitutes the central feature of a stigmatised individual's life. Acceptance into the dominant social group becomes an overriding desire for many and can often be identified as the underlying objective of interviews and autobiographies of former child stars as the individual struggles to distance him or herself from their childhood self.[59]

Goffman uses the term 'stigma' to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, although this is a social definition as 'an attribute is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself rather a stigma is 'a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype.'[60]

In this light it seems possible that former child stars are 'discredited' due to their past success as an embodiment of childhood ideals which they no longer possess. That which they were celebrated for, in a very real sense, no longer exists, exposing not only their shortcomings in growing up and away from their child selves, but the shortcomings of the whole idea of childhood perfection. They are thus in danger of appearing as charlatans, fakes, unusual, unwanted, roleless members of society who have exploited and then stolen something which is held fundamentally dear to the collective consciousness— the redemptive qualities of the innocent child. To be stigmatised then becomes: 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance'[61] and, even more devastating to the individual's construction of identity: 'By definition . . . we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human.'[62] The bewildering reality of such a challenge to one's sense of self is explained by Goffman as a constant source of angst to the stigmatised individual who is well aware of the expected normative standards of the society they live in:

> The stigmatised individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact. His deepest feelings about what he is may be his sense of being a 'normal person,' a human being like anyone else, a person, therefore, who deserves a fair chance and a fair break . . . Yet he may perceive, usually quite correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really 'accept' him and are not ready to make contact with him on 'equal grounds.' Further, the standards he had incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing.[63]

The defiling attribute which seems to cause shame to the former child star is not only the child stardom itself, but more acutely, the failure to live up to such levels of success in adult life. As Dennis Seaton, a former member of the high-profile British kids reggae group of the 1980s called Musical Youth explains, the shift in social status involved in growing away from your success is hard to bear:

> I had to sign on when the money ran out. People were looking at me and laughing, but I had to do it.[64]

And Johnny Whitaker, a former child star of American TV points out that:

> It's not easy when you've been at the pinnacle of your career at eleven.[65]

The personal issue that many former child stars have to face of dealing with a loss of fame, success, and/or credibility is thus exacerbated further by the embarrassment felt at having everyone around them also aware of their fall from grace. Goffman describes the issue of management of information by stigmatised persons as crucial due to the discomfort engendered by such experiences of social shame:

> To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where.[66]

However, questions as to whom you reveal to, when and how much (for nonphysical stigma), are clearly not an option for very well-known former child stars—the information is physically embodied in their resemblance to their childhood self, and socially available due to their reputation and their famous name. Goffman describes the complicated stigma of fame in relation to information control thus:

> Where an individual has a public image, it seems to be constituted from a small selection of facts which may be true of him, which facts are inflated into a dramatic and newsworthy appearance, and then used as a full picture of him. In consequence a special type of stigmatisation can occur. The figure the individual cuts in daily life before those with whom he has routine dealings is likely to be dwarfed and spoiled by virtual demands (whether favourable or unfavourable) created by his public image. This seems especially to occur when the individual is no longer engaged in newsworthy larger events and must everywhere face being received as someone who no longer is what he once was.[67]

This double-edged nature of fame is summed up by Macaulay Culkin in the following quote:

> When you're put in this position, you can get into any restaurant you want without a reservation, but while you're there everyone is staring at you shove food in your mouth.[68]

He explains how even small things can be used by the media to reinforce stigma, in his case of him being a rebellious child and a 'weirdo':

In his teens he dyed his hair, at home, himself, because he'd never dyed it before, and wanted to. 'The next thing I know, it's on the cover of *People* magazine,' he says. 'I dyed my hair—it was a cover story.'[69]

The powerlessness of the former child star to control his or her public image seems to be an ongoing source of stress and frustration. In Goffman's terms, such individuals have been 'discredited' and must take some form of social action in order to be fully reaccepted into society.

Spoiled or Spoilt? Group Alignment and Ego Identity

It has been suggested that the stigmatised individual defines himself as no different from any other human being, while at the same time he and those around him define him as someone set apart. Given this basic self-contradiction of the stigmatised individual it is understandable that he will make some effort to find a way out of his dilemma, if only to find a doctrine which makes consistent sense out of his situation.[70]

Former child stars are often careful to show that they are sensible, adult, not spoilt, thoughtful, multi-layered, real, worthy, wise, and above all authentic in order to try and deflect the stereotypical image of former child stars which dominates public thinking about this group. Three main techniques for achieving this authenticity were recurrent within the data and each can be seen as a way of re-establishing the individual's credibility as a 'normal' adult:

The first technique is the blaming of parents or a chance encounter for their entry into show business so as to undermine the strength of the transgression as it was not their choice. In this way the former child stars recast themselves as victims of circumstance rather than as the perpetrators of their own misfortune.

Former child stars frequently point out that the responsibility for their entry into show business falls squarely to their parents as if by ridding themselves of the blame of starting the fame machine they can also allay any personal stain on their character as someone who was/is greedy for fame with all the negative connotations of being shallow and arrogant that that implies. By so doing they render themselves a victim of circumstance rather than as having a deviant personality, and lessen the stigma of having a 'spoiled identity.' For example, Paul Peterson emphasises the underlying power and size advantage that parents have over their powerless children:

I got started in show business because my mother was bigger than me. These little kids lie to you reporters and tell you they are the ones pursuing a career.[71]

Former child actor Jay North describes the anger he felt, and still feels, towards those whom he sees as responsible for 'ruining his life':

> I still go into a batting cage and pretend that the baseballs are the heads of my aunt and uncle and the studio people who exploited me as 'Dennis the Menace.' And I always hit the ball well.[72]

In her autobiography, Diana Serra Cary reflects in a more sympathetic manner on the thought processes that she imagines her parents went through before deciding to sign a seven-year Hollywood contract on her behalf when she was two years old in 1920:

> "All I want is to be able to pay our bills," I can hear Mother saying. And Father? "Well now, there's a sweet little spread out in Montana with tall grass, timber, and a river running through . . ." By temporarily pawning his pride, he could one day boast of a ranch that would constitute an imposing family estate, to be handed on to generations of Montgomerys. This mixture of inherited and cultivated values proved the irresistible bait entrapping Father in my child star career. It also formed the foundation of our working relationship for years to come.[73]

Shirley Temple also describes her phenomenally successful career as the product of determined parents and emphasises her ambiguous attitude towards becoming involved in the film industry in describing the moment she was unwillingly 'discovered':

> I remember when I was three and unknown and some character who turned out to be a talent scout came into dancing school and I hid under the piano. Obviously no poise. He stood around for a while watching and then he said, "I'll take the one under the piano."[74]

Interestingly, even a seeming admission that someone wanted to be a child actor is still turned around so that the responsibility for the consequences of that decision are planted on the parents' shoulders, reinforcing the modern idea that children are not to be held responsible for any decision they make:

> At the grand old age of four, [Sarah] Polley decided she wanted to be an actor like her father, Michael. Though her parents weren't particularly keen on the idea, Polley was so insistent ('I wanted it, wanted it, wanted it') that they eventually gave in.[75]

Even so, the blame still seems to lie with her parents for allowing her to follow her ambition, with the strong implication that they should have protected her from being a star:

> A lot of kids want to be a fireman, too, but you don't send them to fire drill when they're seven years old.[76]

Drew Barrymore paints a slightly different picture of why her parents were to blame for her entry into child stardom by explaining her desire to act as a way of feeling needed and wanted in a way she did not feel at home with her dysfunctional family:

> Why did I want to act? How did I know so early? The answer, I suppose, has always been pretty obvious—at least it has been to me. I loved being part of the group. Actually, I didn't just love it, I needed it. That's what drove me to club hopping later on. Being part of that really fun in-group. As a little kid I was the girl who didn't think anyone loved her, which only inspired me to try to be accepted even more. When you make a movie, or work on any kind of production, I learned, you become part of a very close group. It's a lot like being in a family, a big extended family. And I loved that.[77]

Explaining their entry into child stardom as triggered by either emotional lack or as the result of selfish or misguided parenting is a useful way for former child stars to begin to re-construct their social identity as a person who is fundamentally the same as everyone else, but who has had some unusual and frequently unhappy experiences. This leads on to the second common technique of attempting to establish authenticity that is evident in the data—the emphasis on normality. The ordinariness of their interests, personal relationships, habits, beliefs, and so on is often referred to by former child stars in order to realign their identity with their contemporaries so as to dispel notions of strangeness or stigma with which they are often associated.

This need to be recognised as normal and the bewildering experience of unwittingly becoming a mere image of oneself is poignantly described below in an extract from a letter by Deanna Durbin, a huge Hollywood teen star in the 1930s, which was published in the *Washington Post* in the 1950s:

> My fans sat in the dark, anonymous and obscure, while I was projected bigger than life on the screen. Fans took home an image of me and studio press agents filled in the personal details. They invented most of them and before I would resist, this worldwide picture of me came back stronger than my real person and very often conflicted with it. How could a young, unformed girl fight this publicized image of herself while still groping for her own personality? I was a typical thirteen-year-old American girl. The character I was forced into had little or nothing in common with myself—or with any other youth of my generation for that matter.[78]

Culkin also explains how uncomfortable it is not to be perceived as normal and how frightening it is to be powerlessness over one's public image:

> It's so hard for me to try to see me the way everyone else sees me. Because, you know, there are some times when I think people think I'm the freakiest person in the entire world. I mean, people have really odd preconceived notions of who I am—everyone either thinks I'm either strung out or just plum crazy or just really, you know, emotionally scarred or whatever.[79]

He goes on to defend his young (and ultimately very short-lived) marriage as a run-of-the-mill event:

> People get married young all the time—just because I do, it becomes a big deal.[80]

The importance of reaffirming the shared consensus that children should have a 'proper, normal childhood' is a strong theme in the narratives, indicating the internalisation of the current Western dominant discourse which defines childhood as a separate, protected space which is characterised by the image of the playful, carefree child rather than the working child who is economically active in public life. The stigma that is attached to those who have not had a 'normal' childhood is a large element of the overall stigma of having been a child star, and it seems likely that it is for this reason that there is frequently an emphasis on having wanted to be a 'regular kid' rather than be a star as a child:

> I don't think it's healthy. I think I'd have been better off at school. I would rather have been at school then, certainly. (Sarah Polley)[81]

> I just needed a break. I wanted to go back to school. I was: 'This is my last opportunity to be a normal person.' I just wanted to be 14. I wanted to be 15. I wanted to do those things. (Macaulay Culkin)[82]

> I needed to do something that was somewhat normal—I hate that word, but you know what I mean. I needed that for myself more than anything, I really did. (Glenn Scarpelli)[83]

> I don't want to go back to making pictures and I wouldn't recommend it as a career for youngsters. It's hard enough to grow up without getting into the kind of life where your friends are adults instead of children. I missed out on a lot of the joys of girls who lead normal lives. (Deanna Durbin) [84]

The modern psychological idea that a missed childhood has to be made up for in later life by, for example, regressing back into childhood or undergoing psychoanalysis to explore key events from one's youngest years seems to be a commonly drawn upon discourse in attempts by former child stars to rationalise and explain their behaviour:

> I get to be a kid now, because I wasn't a kid when I supposed to be one. But in some ways, I'm like an old woman: lived it, seen it, done it, have the T-shirt. (Drew Barrymore)[85]

> Sometimes you just need time to go crazy. But there's no room to do that. They expect you to be professional all of the time. (Jamie Bell)[86]

> From the time I was very young, I was a professional, making money and assuming responsibilities. I was living the life of a thirty year old. (Kristy McNichol)[87]

The strength of the tenets of developmental psychology which explain growing up as a set sequence of ages and stages whereby deviation from the schema is detrimental to the fully grown adult's personality is evident in the way in which this theory is unquestionably accepted in contemporary narratives of former child stars. For example Butch Patrick, who starred as fanged wolfboy Eddie Munster on the popular American TV show *The Munsters* in the 1960s, describes the stages of his early life like this:

> My first 20 years were spent working in an adult world. I made up for it by being a hell-raiser for the next 10 years.[88]

The logic of having to reclaim a childhood that was 'lost' in order to be a 'whole' person at last is a peculiarly late modern idea that informs both the concept of there being a curse on child stars and the way in which former child stars often rationalise and justify any subsequent ill fortune or criminal behaviour. As Goffman explains: 'The stigmatized individual is likely to use his stigma for 'secondary gains,'[89] as an excuse for ill success that has come his way for other reasons'; he goes on to describe a patient whose facial disfigurement dominates all aspects of his social and emotional adjustment:

> It is the 'hook' on which the patient has hung all inadequacies, all dissatisfactions, all procrastinations and all unpleasant duties of social life, and he has come to depend on it not only as a reasonable escape from competition but as a protection from social responsibility.[90]

Being a former child star certainly does seem to be used as a hook for inadequacies and dissatisfactions for some, just as the media chooses to hook all negative events in a former child star's life onto the fact that they were successful when very young. This link between the damaged child self and the damaged adult self is further reinforced in many narratives by the process of confessing to how miserable they really were as children—the 'true story' of what life was like as a child star.

This brings us to the third technique often used by former child stars to try to establish authenticity as adults, namely the highlighting of their unhappy experiences as a child star and/or their difficult relationship with their parents. Such experiences are carefully presented as being none of the child's fault or under their control and can be seen as narrative tools used in order to gain sympathy and understanding and defuse the negative associations of having had exceptional experiences as a child. This is achieved

by former child stars by casting themselves as unenviable and encourages the public to look behind the media-created stereotyped image and see the individual as a 'real person.'

Unhappy experiences are often related to the complicated relationship between child and parent which being a child star seems to engender due to fears that the parent is living out his or her dreams through the child or that the child's chief value to the parent is in financial terms:

> When I was old enough to start caring about these things I did think I'd like to be able to go home and talk to my dad instead of my manager. To be able to separate the two is not easy . . . he had always wanted to be an actor, and I think he was living through me. (Petula Clark)[91]

> It was something that I didn't really want to do in the first place really, and it was just something that became . . . it just felt like there was a machine and it was starting to eat me up too. And I kind of didn't want to be part of that whole world. It wasn't me. But it was something that I really didn't necessarily have a choice in the matter. There was too much money and too many livelihoods at stake for me to just quit, or for my father to allow me to quit. (Macaulay Culkin)[92]

> It definitely wasn't what a father–son relationship should be, from very early on . . . he was abusive and he hit and he got drunk and all those now cliché kind of things. (Macaulay Culkin)[93]

The feeling of powerlessness in the face of not just parents but also agents, producers, directors, and money-men is also drawn on to elicit pity in the narratives of the former child stars:

> I remember one time near the end of school year, I was walking down the road with my mother saying what I wanted to do this summer and suddenly I knew there was something she did not want to tell me. She said: 'Don't make any plans this summer. You might be working.' Then you find out they had already signed the contract. (Macaulay Culkin)[94]

> The Rank Organisation to whom I was under contract didn't want me to grow up because I was more valuable to them as a child than as an adolescent. So I was kept back. (Petula Clark)[95]

> We had to set up our own companies. We had to get accountants and sit in on board meetings. I would ask questions but I was 15 and I felt like I was bothering them. (Michael Grant)[96]

> Even then, at 13, I was thinking, this isn't what I want. We weren't really in a position to argue. I should have been more assertive in hindsight, but I was a child. I had no influence on my career. To say we were manipulated is an understatement. We were led by everybody and anybody. (Michael Grant)[97]

I was a quarter of a thing. Whatever I did, I felt the burden of three other people and all the crew who worked on the show. (David Nelson)[98]

Being lonely and isolated is also a common theme in recounts of early childhood experiences for former child stars, as recalled here by Culkin and by Heather Ripley, who starred in the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*[99] as a 'saccharine cute blond girl':

They moved to a flat in Clapham, south London and while her mother revelled in the swinging sixties, Ripley says she used to put signs in the windows asking passing children to befriend her. She has not spoken to her mother for nine years. (re: Heather Ripley)[100]

One day you are an average kid walking down the street and the next this kid is peering in your window trying to get a glimpse of you. That was too much for me to handle. I didn't have any friends. I was one of those kids who lock themselves in a room and drown themselves in television. (Macaulay Culkin)[101]

And simply not enjoying the work is emphasised by some who want to dispel the image that being a child star is somehow an easy ride or a quick ticket to success:

I really hated . . . In those days you didn't even get paid enough to make it worth it. (Heather Ripley)[102]

The world completely revolved around the show . . . it's like being in prison. Your life is completely dominated by this part you're playing. (Paul Peterson)[103]

It was tough. There were a lot of times when I did not want to be there. There's times, you know, when I may have been sick and possibly was working and breaking certain, you know, child labour laws. But there were times when you had to do that. And there were times when instead of my mother grabbing me, saying, "No, we're leaving right now," they'd say, "Look please, we just need this last shot—this last shot." (Jon Provost)[104]

As just explained, the recounting of such sad stories can be read as further attempts to establish authenticity by the former child stars—demonstrations of their membership of the 'real world.' The importance of showing that one understands and accepts the social rules governing one's society, even if, for reasons beyond your control you are, or were, unable to conform to them, is explained by Goffman:

To fail to adhere to the code is to be a self-deluded, misguided person; to succeed is to be both real and worthy, two spiritual qualities that combine to produce what is called 'authenticity.'[105]

Goffman describes the advocated codes of conduct for stigmatised individuals which are usually suggested by professionals in terms of how to treat others, strategies of disclosure and how best to conceptualise oneself and also outlines those which are often developed by the individuals themselves such as to see trials as a blessing in disguise or to develop a hostile bravado.

As demonstrated in the preceding analysis, in the case of former child stars there seems to be a standardised response to those stigmatised by a childhood of precocious fame and success which runs through many of the narratives studied. This can be summarised as a three-pronged approach to establishing acceptance and gaining credibility and involves: abdicating responsibility, emphasising normality, and reiterating the personal pain experienced. The overriding objective of narratives containing these elements seems to be to demonstrate that a price for success *has* been paid, thereby challenging the assumption that an adult who was a child star not only attracts but also deserves bad luck, pity, and ridicule as a punishment for his or her supposedly charmed childhood.

This sentiment that to have been a child star is a label that comes with so much baggage and expectation that those stigmatised by it spend a lifetime trying to distance themselves from its connotations is summed up by Paul Peterson in the following poignant quote:

> They don't pay you enough for forever.[106]

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHILD STAR

This chapter has described how the media has created an image of the child star as a cursed individual who is destined for failure in adult life and has examined the individual responses of adult child stars to being stigmatised in this way. In the first section, it was shown that certain journalistic techniques in writing about child stars, such as the sensationalist reporting of 'child star gone bad' stories and the attribution of any negative experiences in a former child star's adult life to their early celebrity, work to reinforce and naturalise the idea that childhood success in the entertainment business is detrimental to happiness in adult life. Having established how child stars are constructed as powerless to control their own public image and destiny in the press, I went on to explore the question of why their stories are presented in such a limited and largely derogatory manner. By drawing on anthropological theories of transgression and punishment it was demonstrated that the way child stars are written about in the media illuminates their status as transgressors in our culture due to their deviation from 'normal' children on one hand, and their illicit trespassing into the adult territories of glamour, sexuality, celebrity, and financial success on the other. Through reference to the work of Douglas and Van Gennep, I illustrated how transgressive acts which cross the abstract boundaries of consensual community life are always conceptualised

as dangerous challenges to the social order, and so those who commit such acts are punished and stigmatised for their wrongdoing. The treatment of the child star in the press was therefore explained in terms of this process and shown to be subject to some of the same techniques of anomaly control identified by Douglas in her study of polluting persons in primitive societies, such as being identified as 'peculiar' and/or 'dangerous.'

The second section of the chapter went on to investigate the reactions of former child stars to this deviant construction of their identities. By analysing the narrative techniques used to justify and rationalise their experiences, as evident in interviews and autobiographical data, it was possible to explore how such individuals both internalise and react to social information about themselves and others and adjust their self-narratives according to dominant definitions of normality. By using the theoretical framework established by Goffman in his work on stigma and spoiled identities, it was demonstrated how former child stars attempt to establish credibility for their adult identities and authenticity in their public images through common techniques of justification, rationalisation, and explanation. The difficulties enshrined in being forever associated with one's childhood self, especially when one was reified as a perfect and wonderful child, were identified as being a central part of the experience of this group who are, in a sense, public representations of the complex status of children in our society who are both images of the future and icons of nostalgia for a lost past.

From this analysis then, it has also become clear that the construction of the child star in the media is connected to wider issues about what constitutes a normal childhood and what happens to those individuals whose early experiences fall outside such a definition. As demonstrated in the first section of this chapter, the socially constructed idea of the 'curse' of the child star has become the dominant discourse surrounding this group due, in a large part, to the way in which stories about child stars are presented in the print media. By examining the way in which such stories draw on shared assumptions about children, childhood, and what is considered to be 'normal,' it is possible to identify themes which have relevance beyond the immediate scope of this study. Firstly, by defining the experience of child stardom as negative and dangerous, the 'curse' enables us to see clearly where the boundaries of acceptable child behaviour and experience lie, at least in one particular direction, and so draws attention to the way in which childhood is socially constructed in our culture. This brings up issues of the 'commonality of childhood experience' which, it has been argued, our society attempts to force on all children, who are viewed as a homogenous group despite huge differences in physicality, ability, experience, and opportunity, thus rendering any whose experiences fall outside the 'normal' as stigmatised. In this sense then child stars are just one example of the many 'failures of childhood' who defy definition according to the Western ideal of the concept and share their 'abnormal' status with others who are excluded due to disability, ethnicity, social status or antisocial behaviour.

Furthermore, the perpetuation of the negative connotation of child stars illuminates the power of the media to oppress certain minority groups by reducing their experiences to a formulised convention and highlights the ways in which such shared stereotypes work to objectify the individual whose experiences place him or her in a specified category, and thus reaffirms the power of the dominant group. In this sense it is relevant to locate the powerlessness of the child star in the broader context of uneven power relations between adults and children, between 'normal' and 'abnormal' children, and between the established authority and minority groups within society. The child star falls on the weak side of each of these dichotomies and is thus exceptionally vulnerable to being constructed, constrained, and defined by forces greater than itself. From this perspective, the child star is nothing more than a media creation and as such can be toyed with, exploited, discredited, and then discarded according to the fickle dictates of the audience.

However, this pathetic image of the child star is but part of the story, and the next chapter examines the phenomenon of successful youngsters from a different perspective. By exploring the enormous power which child stars have to generate emotion, adulation, and multi-million-pound movie deals, the image of the child star as a poor exploited innocent is shown to be just one version of describing the child star which particularly suits our current social climate in regards to dominant definitions of children and childhood. It is demonstrated that there is another equally valid, concurrent way of understanding the child star, this time in terms of their inherent power rather than their socially constructed powerlessness, without which the enduring cultural significance of the child star cannot be fully appreciated.

The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate the powerlessness of the child star and the former child star in escaping from stereotypical definitions of themselves, definitions which are created and controlled externally by the cultural context in which they live. In relation to answering the fundamental questions posed in the introduction of this study as to 'why we have child stars' and 'why they are vilified in the press,' this chapter has aimed to address the latter rather than the former question and has shown that by being presented as deviant in the media, the fate of the child star serves to reinforce dominant collective values as to the rightful place of children in our society. The question of why we have child stars at all is explored in the next chapter.

5   The Power of Child Stars

Although the analysis of discourses which inform the presentation and representation of child stars in the preceding chapter is immensely useful in deconstructing the form and content of media texts on or about such individuals, a whole dimension of meaning is also omitted through this approach to understanding the data. From the very first readings of newspaper and magazine articles about child stars it was apparent that there was something timeless and mythical about both the structure of the stories and the main characters within them. Whereas discourse analysis focuses on the specific activities of rationalisation, justification, and categorisation evident in texts which are contingent upon the particular social context from which they emanate, it cannot account for the possibility of universal themes and ideologies which may tell us more about what it means to be human rather than what meanings have been assigned by humans in a specific society at a particular time. Therefore, the proceeding analysis examines the data from a broadly structuralist perspective in order to provide a fuller understanding of the complexities, tensions, and paradoxes surrounding the figure of the child star in our culture. In a sense, it is an attempt to explore beneath the surface appearances of how child stars are constructed in the media in order to contemplate the timeless universal structures which may underpin their continued presence in our cultural landscape. Even Foucault, whose general approach to social or cultural analysis emanates from his theory of discursive formations and is thus diametrically opposed to structuralism, accepts that it can be a useful tool in investigating certain aspects of culture. As he puts it:

> I recognise the value of [structuralism's] insights . . . when it is a question of analysing a language, mythologies, folk-tales, poems, dreams, works of literature, even films perhaps, structural description reveals relations that could not otherwise be isolated . . . I now have no difficulty in accepting that man's language, his unconscious, and his imagination are governed by laws of structure.[1]

The central idea of structuralism, that there is a universal substructure to every language system and that in order to understand how meaning is

created and shared one must search for the dominant codes or myths or reference systems that underlie the surface appearance of signs, is applied to the analysis of media narratives about child stars in the following two ways in this chapter: The first section, 'Bigger than Big and Smaller than Small,' considers the conceptual function that the child star fulfils by exploring the ideas of psychoanalytic theory, especially the work of Carl Jung,[2] in relation to the recurring archetype of the 'wonder-child.' The second section, 'The Power of Taboo,' examines the role of linguistics and cognitive categorisation in understanding power. In particular it considers child stars in light of Edmund Leach's[3] work on the power of those beings who inhabit a 'between categories' status in society. Through reflecting on how child stars are presented in media texts and images from these perspectives, the connection of these children to universal archetypes and categorisation systems is made explicit, and the power of the child star to transcend culturally specific definitions and boundaries of childhood is explored.

'BIGGER THAN BIG AND SMALLER THAN SMALL': THE CHILD ARCHETYPE AND THE CHILD STAR

This section considers the modern child star as a contemporary manifestation of the 'Child' motif, one of the primordial archetypes described by Jung,[4] in an attempt to connect our current understanding of the child star with something more than a socially constructed concept. Beginning with a review of the ubiquity of extraordinary children as characters in the myths and legends of the world, I then identify the contemporary Western child star as a modern-day manifestation of this ancient archetype. I go on to explain Jung's theory of archetypes and the unconscious in detail with specific reference to the significance of the 'Child' motif and describe how the Christ-child can be conceptualised as the ultimate example of the most powerful 'child' motif—the 'child-god.' Using extracts of textual and visual data about child stars from the early to mid-twentieth century, I show how their portrayals are drawn from characteristics traditionally associated with the Christ-child, such as having supernatural qualities and being inspirational to others. The endurance of the significance of such Christ-like imagery even in today's fragmented post-modern culture is also demonstrated through reference to a series of images of the former child star Macaulay Culkin.

Having established the connection between the twentieth-century construction of the child star and the primordial archetype of the Christ-child, I go on to outline how two other, related powerful themes which have always characterised archetypal wonder-children in myths and legends can still be seen to inform representations of contemporary child stars and indeed form the basis of their significance in our culture. These two themes are: the emphasis on the smallness of the child in contrast to the bigness of their gift or talent, and the central importance of the naturalness of the child which

represents both closeness to the divine and freedom from the corruptions of the adult world.

I end this section by reflecting on the enduring relevance of the 'child' motif to contemporary society and reaffirm my argument that the child star can be conceptualised as a modern manifestation of the ancient archetype of the wonder-child.

The History of the Wonder-Child

Whilst accepting on one level that the child is 'eternally a cultural invention,'[5] it also seems possible that the power of children to generate strong emotional reactions and feelings such as nostalgia, hope, and pity is located within the human psyche and reflected by a culture rather than the other way around. Furthermore, in this context child stars can be seen as ultimate embodiments of this power due to the way in which they represent ideals of childhood in the societies which create them. Taken from this perspective, the child star of stage and screen begins to look less like a symptom of the exploitation of innocence by a media-saturated, late capitalist society and more like a recent contribution to an ancient tradition of extraordinary children in myth and folklore from around the world. As Radford[6] has noted in his study of exceptional early achievers:

> Young heroes are universal in legend, from Alexander through George Washington to Robin, Batman's Boy Wonder.[7]

Radford claims that the idea that children might have some form of supernatural power or ability has persisted for centuries and still continues. It appears that from the earliest recorded myths and legends the superchild has appeared, possessing extraordinary strength, precocious skills and abilities, and/or a phenomenal speed of growth. For example, Hercules is said to have strangled two snakes in his cradle, Merlin spoke as soon as he was born and, according to Lessa,[8] the supernatural growth of the hero is 'a plot device almost ubiquitous throughout Oceania.'[9]

Interestingly, elements of the supernatural, mythical marvellous child are evident in stories of child stars since Victorian times. For example, in this extract from an interview from 1889 with Dan Leno, an adult vaudeville performer who had been working all his life in the theatre, emphasis and pride is placed on the fact that he started performing almost from birth and was in no need of the protective period of childhood:

> 'Let us go back to the days of your childhood.'
>   'Oh, yes. I was never one of them. Somehow or other I got on to the stage at a very early age, and felt quite a man. They tell me I fell from my cradle not 1,000 miles from my birth. This catastrophe fixed me as an acrobat, and so I went on till I reached the age of eight.'[10]

Similarly, a later interview with the father of Mickey Rooney, in which Mr Rooney reflects on the medical wonder of his son's superfast development, highlights the endurance of this depiction of the child star as being inexplicably extraordinary:

> 'Mickey didn't have much of a childhood,' his dad often reminisced. 'At the age of one and a half we had a doctor give him a thorough check-up, and he told us Mickey had the mentality of a ten year old. And by the time he was three, Mickey was earning a living on the stage.'[11]

In mythical tales such developmental precocity serves to separate heroes from simple mortals and to mark out the individual as chosen, special, and 'touched by the divine,' destined to live through extraordinary events, to teach others lessons about life and ultimately to sacrifice their own personal happiness to the greater good of those they serve. That this method of separating out the 'hero' from the 'mortal' has been a common thread in constructing child stars as special and marvellous since Victorian times, as demonstrated in the preceding examples, is testament to the strength of this 'plot device' to mark certain children out as having a significant destiny.

Indeed, Kerenyi,[12] who worked closely with Jung in trying to devise a 'Science of Mythology,' identified the great significance of the child motif in Greek and Roman mythology and drew parallels with sources from India and Finland. However, although he warned against attempting to collate a comprehensive study of such incidences, claiming that it would 'contribute nothing decisive in principle,' he did assert that 'it would nevertheless produce a world-wide incidence and frequency of the motif.'[13] Taking Kerenyi's advice then, it is not the aim of this section to present evidence of the multitude manifestations of the extraordinary child as it appears in the myths and stories of many countries—it is taken it for granted that they are there—but to concentrate on the definition and expression of one contemporary example of the extraordinary child—the 'child star—in British and American society since the turn of the twentieth century.

If definitions of success are culturally specific, then what else would be expected from a modern-day heroic child than to be famous and to look perfect in close-up? Late capitalist society does not call for children with the ability to strangle snakes or defeat armies or indeed to defeat the supernatural forces of evil. Our definitions of a wonder child are all about image, sentiment, and the reinforcement of stereotypical ideas about perfect children. That is where we find our hope for the future and our experience of 'wholeness'—through the image of the perfect child projected on screen or stage, or through a CD player, an image I would argue that is no more related to 'normal' children than Hercules or Jesus were similar to their contemporaries. However, the very nature of the mass media, and especially the film industry and star system in America, encourages the

illusion that anyone can be famous—they just need a 'lucky break.' As Marshall[14] has explored in his study of power and celebrity, the ubiquitous rags-to-riches story of the successful film star encourages the audience to align themselves with a star on one level because he/she is just like them, but also to feed their fantastical aspirations that one day it really could be them. The fascination with the day-to-day lives and habits of celebrities is evidence of just how successful this marketing technique has been. In this sense then the child on screen could be anyone's child, and yet there is undeniably something exceptional about them as they generally embody, or are presented as embodying, the facets of childhood which represent the ideal in that society at that particular time. The differences between the child stars of today and the child heroes of ancient myths, and all those children who have been marked out as exceptional in some way in-between times, are, I would argue, merely surface ones. Important to this discussion are the underlying or structural elements of the child star which are universal, timeless, and overwhelmingly powerful. In order to explore this idea further, the following section considers Jung's theory of arche-types and the collective unconscious with particular focus on the 'child' motif and its relation to the modern child star.

Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious

Jung argues that the extensive parallels among the mythologies of societies "force' us to assume that we are dealing with 'autochthonous' revivals inde-pendent of all tradition and thus that 'myth-forming' structural elements must be present in the unconscious psyche'[15] and that these products take the form of 'motifs,' 'primordial images,' or 'archetypes.' The 'child' motif is one example of these archetypes and is said to represent the 'preconscious, childhood aspect of the collective psyche.'[16] Other archetypes include the 'trickster,' the 'spirit,' and the 'mother,' all of which appear frequently in dreams, myths, and fairytales in various guises—for example, 'child' can appear as a dwarf, an animal, or even as a golden egg. Clearly, then, the motif is not intended to be understood as a real person—the 'child' is a sym-bol, not an empirical child. As Jung explains: 'The archetype does not pro-ceed from physical facts, but describes how the psyche experiences physical fact'[17] although, as Jung concedes, in the last analysis it is impossible to say what the archetypes do actually refer to as they are manifestations of pro-cesses in the unconscious.

Jung uses the term 'collective unconscious' to refer to certain common structural elements of the human psyche which, 'like the morphological ele-ments of the human body, are *inherited*'[18] and which influence and direct our feelings, thought, and actions in ways of which we are not consciously aware. Jung conceptualises the collective unconscious as being located in the deep recesses of our minds where individual and cultural differences are no longer relevant:

> The deeper 'layers' of the psyche lose their individual uniqueness as they retreat farther and farther into darkness. 'Lower down' . . . they become increasingly collective until they are universalised and extinguished in the body's materiality.[19]

Jung uses the concept of the collective unconscious to explain the universality of themes and motifs in myths[20] and views the recurrence of archetypes as evidence of the eternal struggle for synthesis of the conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche and of the inherent human fear of loss of connection with their primordial, unconscious beginnings. The archetypes then are a vital link with the essential, original nature of human beings:

> If we cannot deny the archetypes or otherwise neutralize them, we are confronted, at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from us.[21]

The 'child' archetype has a central part to play in assuaging this fear of loss of connection with the past as 'over and over again in the "metamorphosis of the gods," he rises up as the prophet or first born of a new generation and appears unexpectedly in the unlikeliest of places.'[22] Jung gives the Christ-child as the ultimate example of this 'child-god' motif who is described in the legend of St Christopher as being 'smaller than small and bigger than big,' thus encapsulating the connection of supernatural, divine power with mere mortals which the 'child' archetype represents. The association of religiosity with the child motif was common throughout the Middle Ages from which time Jung notes there is much evidence of visions or 'irruptions of consciousness' which involved children, such as Meister Eckharts's famous vision of a naked boy. Jung also connects the motif with spontaneous experiences in English ghost stories such as the 'Radiant Boy' recorded by Ingram in 1890. The mystical character of the child motif also appears in literature with, for example, Goethe's Faust being transformed into a boy and admitted into the 'choir of blessed youths' after his death.[23]

In relation to our modern-day child stars, it seems likely that in the secular, media-saturated society we inhabit the 'new interpretation' of the 'child' has less to do with religion and more to do with celebrity. Indeed, as Jung asserts, archetypes cannot be disposed of as non-scientific, archaic relics of an earlier, less rational time, nor can they be explained away; we are able only to 'dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress.'[24] That the 'modern dress' of the 'child' archetype is that of a media celebrity is somewhat inevitable given the social context in which the motif is now being expressed. However, analysis of descriptions of child stars also reflect the earlier mystical connections of the 'child,' and the theme of religiosity is a recurrent, occasionally dominant one throughout twentieth-century

writings on child stars. This suggests two main issues: firstly, that the need for the child star to represent a connection between the natural and the supernatural, or the mortal and the divine, is still very much alive and informs our construction of the child star, and secondly, that the way in which Jesus and the Christian concepts of angels and cherubs are referenced in such descriptions indicate that the Christ-child has become a prototype of child stars since the dissemination of His story, thus providing a tangible link between modern-day child stars of the stage and screen and the primordial 'child-god.' These themes are explored in the following section, which examines newspaper and magazine articles about child stars since the early twentieth century.

The Christ-Like Child Star

Taking Christ as the ultimate archetype of the wonder-child, or child star, it is interesting to note the similarities between His image and the way in which child stars of the golden era of Hollywood were portrayed. The following eight attributes came up repeatedly in literature on child stars of that time as the exemplary quotes demonstrate, each reflecting a quality which has traditionally been associated with the divine goodness of the Christ-child who is portrayed as perfect, pure, and the living embodiment of God on earth. According to the dominant themes in the data then, the child star:

1. Has a natural, inherent talent that has not been taught.

   Miss Corbin is a remarkable little emotional actress and her ability to shed tears is considered marvellous for she does not 'act', but is just as natural and unaffected as her parents could wish for and does not realize the value of her work. (re: Virginia Lee Corbin, 1917)[25]

   She can talk, dance, sing, play the piano and violin, cry, play doll and play dead with equal ease and grace. She doesn't have to be pinched when the director calls for a stream of tears to roll down her chubby little cheeks, for she is emotionally, dramatically emotional, and feels her roles as deeply as do the grown-up stars. (re: Lorna Volare /'Baby Lorna', 1916)[26]

2. Embodies physical perfection.

   Her pretty little doll face is so perfect that you hope she'll never, never grow older. A slender little figure, with a stateliness derived, perhaps, from her English-French ancestry, which is fascinating, supports her flower-like face. (re: Virginia Lee Corbin, 1917)[27]

   As a glance at her photograph will reveal, if you have for the moment forgotten how she looked on the screen, this little girl who earns a great big salary every week is remarkably beautiful. (re: Kittens Reichert, 1916)[28]

3. Has a special, almost supernatural quality.

    Her tiny face is ethereal in its glowing sensitiveness. (re. Margaret O'Brien, 1943)[29]

    These two children . . . have ability that is absolutely staggering to the average person. Jane has been pronounced a most marvellous child actress. She is fearless, she has an elfin comprehension of 'stunts' that is amazing and a true dramatic sense. (re: Jane Lee, 1916)[30]

4. Is set apart from 'normal' children by way of their lifestyle and relationships with adults.

    During this time, Virginia, as well as the other children, were being treated 'royally' by the Fox company. On the studio lot they were provided a private bed, individual dressing rooms, play rooms, a gymnasium, baths, a swimming pool and a rest room. (re: Virginia Lee Corbin)[31]

5. Does not engage in annoying or irritating behaviour which would otherwise be typical of a child of their age.

    Once when she was stubborn, her mother slapped her hands. She's never forgotten it and the one word 'punishment' is enough to settle any problem. (re: Margaret O'Brien, 1943)[32]

6. Has a purpose in life to uplift or inspire others.

    Ah Jackie, wonderful Jackie! Jackie is inspiring and inspired. Just to be in his presence is to feel inspired. His personality is beautiful, lovely. It's spiritual. You feel close to his spirituality. (Charlie Chaplin on Jackie Coogan, 1921)[33]

7. Is often unusually intelligent and/or demonstrates developmental precocity.

    (she) gave evidence of extraordinariness by talking at age eleven months. She also displayed unusual emotional ability at an early age—that is, she cried. When she was three, Virginia could sing in key, anything she had heard more than once. She had a wonderful memory, even at that early age, and was a remarkable dancer. (re: Virginia Lee Corbin, 1913)[34]

    though she was only a frail little being, her mind was developed far more than one would expect, and when she learnt to talk, she never spoke a baby word. She seemed to have a wonderful memory also, and easily learnt all kinds of songs, stories and poems by heart. (re: Virginia Lee Corbin, 1915)[35]

8. Is always unusually sensitive.

    Expressions flee across her tiny face like living things as she listens to her director or a friend. Their every thought finds true response on the plainest of little faces. (re: Margaret O'Brien, 1943)[36]

The quasi-religious status of the child star is exemplified in this extraordinary quote in an article in *Photoplay* magazine in 1923 entitled, 'What's going to happen to Jackie Coogan?' where the tacit relationship between the child star and Jesus is made explicit:

> After meeting him several times with his serious little manner, his courtesies and profound remarks, you wonder, 'Am I hypnotized? Is he genius or child?' We talked, he danced for me and recited with a reverence close to holy, the words of 'My Madonna.' I thought of the Young King who stood in rags at the steps of the altar . . . and lo! Through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe . . . he stood there in king's raiment, and the glory of God filled the place, and the trumpeters blew upon their trumpets and the singing boys sang, and the Bishop's face grew pale and his hands trembled. 'A greater than I hath crowned thee' he cried and knelt before him . . . I thought of Jackie as the Young King. And I went away wondering. For me Jackie is a masterpiece of life. Can the world change or time alter such a masterpiece? [37]

Endowing a select few children with such extreme Christ-like qualities in order to market films demonstrates the power which children possess to generate emotion and a deep sense of awe in adults (as well as the power which adults have to manipulate the image of the child). Such explicit endowments of child stars with saintly qualities is characteristic of the textual construction of the child star in Hollywood in the early decades of the twentieth century and was reinforced through studio portraits and magazine photographs of the young stars looking beautiful, innocent, and vulnerable. The iconic image of Shirley Temple from the 1930s with her halo of blond curly hair, cherubic features, cuddly build, and glowing fair skin, looking every inch the 'angel child,' is a memorable example of this.

Such blatant textual and visual links between the child star and the Christ-child are less evident in today's more cynical, secular social climate than in pre-war Western society, although the angelic child figure does still appear, sometimes quite glaringly, in media stories about child stars. For example, Evan Rachel Wood, the teenage star of the controversial movie *Thirteen*,[38] is described by her director more like a mythical young hero with superhuman gifts than an actor:

> She's very quiet, she keeps to herself on set, but when she starts to act it just beams out of her. It's incredible. And when you realised that she's in every scene of the movie, so she's on for every minute for 24 days consecutively, and that one day she had to do 13 different scenes, so she went through eight changes of hair and make-up, it was 115°F, everything was against her . . . And Evan never complained, not once. She always delivered. (*The Guardian*, 16 November 2003)[39]

Contemporary photo shoots of child stars and former child stars also often reference the ideals of angelic purity, sometimes in the style of postmodern pastiche rather than as straight-faced representation. An example of this is a series of photos of a twenty-two-year-old Macaulay Culkin for *The Face* magazine[40] where the former child star is depicted in ways which both reference his status as an iconic child star with all the incumbent expectations of innocence, beauty, and 'supernaturalness' which go with it, and also satirise that image by posing the subject with accoutrements of adult sexuality and vice. Therefore, we have Culkin wearing angel wings and smoking a cigarette, dressing in homoerotic-style clothes and poking his tongue out, and grinning widely whilst holding a beer. The sexual nature of the poses can also be read in reference to the taboo issues of paedophilia which surround child stars, whereby the visual pleasures they provide are often titillating to those who derive sexual gratification from fantasising about young children. Indeed, the fact that Culkin is shown poking his tongue out in one of the photos can be read as both a defiance to this sexualisation of his innocent childhood image, and a satirisation of the fact that although he is a grown man he still looks uncannily like his ten-year-old self. By showing Culkin engaging in such a childish act as sticking out his tongue the picture seems to be blurring the divide between his child and adult self and demonstrating that the childlike image will always be part of who Culkin is and how others see him. A picture of Culkin, replete with cigarette and beer, grinning widely and looking extremely pleased with himself extends this theme. Again, knowing his background as a child star engenders a specific reading of this picture whereby the adult symbols of the beer bottle and cigarette are in contrast both to the childish crouching position and the huge platform shoes he is wearing which bring to mind a child dressing up in adult clothes. The homoerotic feel of the picture again contorts that childlike image and reframes Culkin as something of a child-adult hybrid freak. However, the playful nature of the photos and the amused look on Culkin's face throughout the images suggests a deliberate manipulation and desecration of his former image and a claim to not be taken 'seriously' as an adult, but just to be accepted as who he is.

That these photos of Culkin engender such a reading is testament to the power of the image of the child star to bring with it associations of purity, innocence, and specialness. Even though the link between the Christ-child and the child star is not so baldly made today as it was in the Hollywood child star era, certain recurrent themes still seem to characterise the 'starlike' qualities of certain children which reinforce their supernatural status and thus their connection to the archetype of the 'wonder-child.'

From the readings of the textual and visual material, these themes seem to be largely concerned with the specialness of the child both in terms of their physical appearance and their 'nature' and can be divided into two main elements, each of which is explored next. These are: the emphasis on the smallness and/or immaturity of the child in contrast to the size of his/

her talent or success, and the highlighting of the importance of the child being 'natural.'

The Sacred Smallness of the Child

As described previously, the concept of the child as 'smaller than small yet bigger than big' is one which has recurred in stories about heroic children throughout the centuries and across cultures. As Jung explains, the motif:

> complements the impotence of the child by means of its equally miraculous deeds. This paradox is the essence of the hero.[41]

Indeed, the 'tinyness' of child stars has long been central to their appeal, with some even making a whole career based on their unusually small stature. A well-known example of this is Gary Coleman, the actor who played Arnold in the American 1980s TV sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*. Coleman has a medical condition which prevented him growing taller than the height of a small child for the rest of his life, and as a child star his longevity was almost entirely due to the fact that he could go on playing an eight-year-old when he was far into his teens. He defied that annoying trait of growing up which spelled the end of so many childhood careers, albeit to the reported detriment of his own psychological well-being.[42] However, the very smallness which made him so cute as a child became a physical stigma as he matured, an anomaly which media photographers exploited to the full with pictures emphasising the contradictory childlike stature and adult features of the former child star. That the power of the child star resides in their 'smallness' coupled with their immaturity and tender years is clear in the following quote from 1916, which sings the praises of yet more 'marvellous' small children:

> Jane and Katherine Lee . . . are shining examples of just what genius a child may possess and still remain—just a child![43]

In contemporary newspaper articles about child stars, this motif of sacred smallness tends to be in the form of a juxtaposition of the 'normal' child with his or her extraordinary talents or experiences. For example;

> Declan Galbraith likes The Simpsons . . . His favourite foods are lasagne, pizza and spaghetti Bolognese and he wants some new computer games for Christmas. But Declan possesses an extraordinary singing voice and it has won him a million pound recording contract with EMI . . . He has a voice coach and a manager. He even has his own fan club. Quite an entourage for a boy who still has a cuddly Barney dinosaur on his bed. (re: Declan Galbraith, *The Guardian*, 23 September 2002)[44]

> They [the *Harry Potter* actors] are the most famous kids in the world, but they're also the most normal. (*The Telegraph*, 25 October 2002)[45]

The vulnerability of the children who possess such 'gifts' seems to be part of their appeal. Indeed, the very passage of childhood to adulthood can be seen as a universal journey from helplessness to strength, with the child star perhaps lighting the way with hope for the future. Jung describes the power of the 'child' like this:

> The 'child' is all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant dubious beginning and the triumphal end. The 'eternal child' in man is an indescribable experience, an incongruity, a handicap, and a divine prerogative.[46]

As well as being 'bigger than big and smaller than small,' the other most consistent theme in the construction of child stars to have survived over the decades is an emphasis on the importance of naturalness in the performance of a child. This together with related concepts of innocence, purity and vulnerability seem to represent the central characteristics of what is required from a child star in accordance with the 'wonder-child' archetype and is explored next.

The Cult of Naturalness

> As bringers of light, that is, enlargers of consciousness, they overcome darkness, which is to say that they overcome the earlier unconscious state. [47]

In essence the power of the child star appears to emanate largely from the authenticity of his/her performance in terms of being natural and unaffected. Such a performance embodies the pre-cultural, pure, immediate relationship which (very young) children have with the world and which could be seen as the very foundation of their power. Indeed, the supposed preternatural wisdom of children (as celebrated to such a great extent by the eighteenth-century Romantic movement), has come to form one of the central tenets of Western Society's contemporary construction of childhood.

This power of child stars to connect world-weary adults with something purer and more natural seems to be reinforced and celebrated in media stories, reviews, and interviews in three main ways:

1. The derision of artificiality and precociousness evident in the on- or off-screen behaviour of child stars.

This is related to the overwhelmingly negative attitude in the media towards children who have attended stage school, apparently expressing a shared sentiment that if 'it' doesn't come naturally, you can't be taught 'it,' with the underlying assumption, of course, that 'it' is a divine gift. The following quotes from an article entitled 'A Touch of Magic Beats Stage School' with the tag line: 'Child Star of Harry Potter Film Proves that Natural Charm Can Outshine Years of Showbiz Training' illustrate the point:

We really wanted to stay away from stage schools . . . There are so many mannerisms they have been taught which you just have to spend time helping them unlearn. (Stephen Daldry, director of *Billy Elliot*[48])

Jamie Bell who plays the gifted dancer and miner's son *Billy Elliot* . . . is another raw and untried talent. Although Bell had danced before, he had none of the trademark tricks that stage school tend to pass on. (*The Observer*, 27 August 2000)[49]

Even in the highly stylised environment of 1940s Hollywood, it seems that no one wanted to see a phoney child:

. . . everybody was bowing to the talent of the popular boy star. Both were on the bill. The kid star came out first, in his best precious child manner, prancing and smirking. He was delicious—but he was a flop. Then Mickey [Rooney], about as big as a cigarette butt and every bit as unpretentious, shot out of the wings. He didn't fool around; he was as direct as a kick in the pants . . . he launched into his patter; he sang, he danced, he jawed with the audience—he wowed 'em. He made the kid star look like a cream puff somebody had stepped on. (*Photoplay Magazine*, August 1943)[50]

2. *The approval of naturalness in the performances of children.*

By responding to 'natural' performances and performers with admiration, the preferred style of child stars is made implicit in newspaper and magazine articles, as evident in the following quotes:

Potter director hails 'unstarry' actors. (*BBC News Online,* 6 December 2002)[51]

Fishman . . . earned his role with his raw boyishness. He marched into an audition with no acting experience and few expectations. (re: Michael Fishman, *LA Times*, 31 June 1996)[52]

Lisa has tremendous enthusiasm. She's a natural. (re: Lisa Foiles, *LA Times* 23 June 2002)[53]

It all started at his nan's 60th birthday party. All the children in the family were planning to sing her a song, but when it came to it, everybody chickened out—except Declan. He stood up and sang a folk song called 'Tell Me Ma,' and instantly everybody knew he had something special. (re: Declan Galbraith *The Guardian*, 23 September 2002)[54]

3. *The emphasis on the innocence and vulnerability of the child star.*

In order to ensure child stars are seen as a non-threatening entity, their vulnerability is often alluded to. For example, 'Little Girl Lost'[55] was the title of an article following the suicide of former child star Dana Plato, and

the following description of Declan Galbraith's childlike glee highlights his defencelessness in the face of imminent fame:

> But he's still a sweet boy, still delighted to come second in the local swimming gala . . . and bowled over by the cool little extras his burgeoning singing career have brought him. (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2002)[56]

Interestingly, interviews, articles, and reviews from the Victorian era tend not to attribute child actors and singers with special qualities or view them as being in some way more perfect or pure than other children, although they do praise naturalness in a child's performance:

> her first appearance was not marked by those painful mechanical movements which so often distinguish the appearance of juvenile performers. (Review of Flora Robina in *Interlude*, 16 January 1886)

> We must accord our tribute of praise to Miss Vera Beringer for the most natural child performance we have ever seen . . . Her perception of the humour and pathos of the character is thoroughly well shown. (Review of Little Lord Fauntleroy in *The Playgoer*, May 1889)

The reluctance of the Victorians to imbue divine qualities onto child performers is probably due to the immoral associations that surrounded the theatrical life and actors at the time, which would have made such angelic connotations quite unsuitable for those children who worked on the stage. It seems that the wonder-child of the Victorian era was more likely to be a refined, delicate musical prodigy or the fictional character of a redemptive child in a Dickensian novel.

Indeed, it took the bright lights and avarice of 1920s Hollywood to redefine the child actor as a child star by building on the established appeal of the natural child performer and adding elements of angelic purity and morality to create an image of a 'star child' who was fit for the movies. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the phenomenal success of this image can only be satisfactorily explained by reference to the strength of the 'wonder-child' archetype from which it was derived.

The Relevance of the 'Child' Motif in Contemporary Western Society

As Jung reiterates: 'The child motif represents not only something that existed in the distant past but also something that exists *now*,' whose purpose is to compensate or correct the 'inevitable one-sidedness and extravagances of the conscious mind' which has become too rational and progressive and thus is 'far from the laws and roots of his [sic] being.'[57]

The great power of the 'child' motif and thus the child star is then its futurity, its potential to synthesise the conscious and the unconscious. The

'child' is 'a symbol which unites the opposites, a mediator, bringer of healing, that is, one who makes whole.'[58] The malleability of the 'child' motif to take on different guises in different ages and societies becomes clear when we consider the following assertion by Jung:

> No archetype can be reduced to a simple formula . . . It has a potential existence only, and when it takes shape in matter it is no longer what it was. It persists throughout the ages and requires interpreting ever anew. The archetypes are the imperishable elements of the unconscious, but they change their shape continually.[59]

That archetypes 'change their shape continually' and yet are anchored to a fundamental human need for synthesis in the psyche suggests that there is much more to the phenomena of child stars than a social constructionist reading alone would allow. The possibility of conceptualizing the 'child star' as a universal symbol transgresses cultural specificity and suggests that a wider understanding of their significance is required. As Jung reiterates, the work of the 'child' motif is never completed—it will re-appear in different guises as long as the cycle of life and death continues:

> The symbol always says: In some such form as this will a new manifestation of life, a deliverance from the bondage and weariness of life, be found . . . Love and joy is the message of the 'wonder-child,' the new symbol.[60]

THE POWER OF TABOO

The previous section explored the genealogy of the wonder-child motif and related current constructions of child stars to a seemingly universal need to reify and exalt a small number of special children. This section takes a slightly different angle on the power of the child star by considering the way in which the child-star motif gains significance because of the way it is situated in relation to a wider system of signs and meaning. As Levi-Strauss[61] demonstrates throughout his body of work, the universality of myth relates not to the prevalence of specific motifs, but to the recurrences in different cultures of similar structural relationships between different motifs.

In order to understand the power of the child star in contemporary culture it is useful to consider the centrality of the dual concepts of the taboo and the sacred in creating meaning in all cultures. This links us inevitably to reflecting on the role of myth in establishing and reaffirming social order. As Leach explains, in stories:

> any reference to a transgression of taboo, however oblique, creates vicarious excitement. In this respect the myths of our own society have quite a different quality for **us** from the myths of other people . . . unless you share

the same moral assumptions as the myth narrator, you will not be 'shocked' by what he says and you will then have difficulty in picking up the message. For it is the *shock* effect of references to breaches of moral taboo which gives myth its 'meaning' . . . the moral point is made clear by emphasising the over-whelming disasters which are directly associated with the mythical breach of normality.[62]

Given this, it begins to become clearer as to why media stories about child stars hold such power to shock. The child who has transgressed into adult territory creates 'vicarious excitement,' the immoral behaviour of greedy parents who are supposed to protect their children shocks us, and we feel a sense of satisfaction at learning of the downfall of such ambiguous individuals who represent a threat to our shared social order. Due to the fact that the child star offends our particular shared beliefs and values around children and child-rearing it makes sense that it is perhaps only our society at this particular time which experiences 'shock' at the antics of child stars. For example, transgressions around the themes of precocious sexuality and drug taking are particularly shocking in relation to child stars because they invert the very tenets of innocence and purity on which their significance as a cultural category is based, as demonstrated in the following extracts which were also quoted in the preceding chapter to illustrate the boundaries of childhood in our culture:

> They sing provocatively, wear make-up and tattoos—and are aged between nine and eleven . . . Although the band is energetic and enthusiastic, the girls have been filmed swaying their underdeveloped hips in an effort to appear sexy. (re: BreZe, *Sunday Herald Sun*, 24 October 1999)[63]

> She was arrested in the show's third season for cocaine possession. Left and returned several times. Fell asleep during rehearsals, refused to take drug tests, and reportedly appeared incoherent at points . . . She entered a rehab clinic at the age of thirteen to fight drug and alcohol abuse. In one episode, she swiped her mother's credit card and hopped on a plane to the West Coast with the intention of continuing on to Hawaii. She was apprehended by private investigators in Los Angeles and led back to rehab in handcuffs. (re: Drew Barrymore, *abcnews.com*, 3 September 2002)[64]

> He sued his father, scrawled graffiti in his New York apartment, and dyed his hair blue. (re: Macaulay Culkin, *abcnews.com*, 3 September 2002)[65]

The very fact that we are shocked to read of such behaviour indicates that not only do we share the same 'moral assumptions' as the myth narrator (in this case the mass media), but that we also demand stories which excite us in this way and thus reinforce our alignment to shared normative standards. However, it also seems that the child star has to do nothing more deviant than exist, and then grow up, to be set apart as transgressive and

taboo-laden due to the fundamental difference between the child star and the 'normal' child.

It seems possible then that although the wonder-child archetype is universal, due to our current construction of childhood the way in which it is expressed and received at this time in this society renders it a taboo. It could be argued, though, that this status imbues the child star with even more power because of the inherent power of the taboo. Indeed, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, 'taboo' means 'the system or act of setting apart a person or thing as *accursed* or *sacred*,' both of which seem applicable to the child star at various stages of his/her career and both of which arise out of the separateness and specialness of the child star.

Leach's thesis as to how certain people and things are set apart from the accepted social order is that 'we make binary distinctions and then mediate the distinction by creating an ambiguous (and taboo-loaded) intermediate category.'[66] For example, in-between the binary opposites of 'man' and 'not man' lies the intermediate category of 'pets.' 'Pets' are therefore taboo because they are not distinct 'wild' animals, nor are they human, and so their names become terms of abuse in our language (e.g., bitch). Leach argues that even though such binary distinctions are taught to us as children through our specific languages (and so may differ according to varying cultural concepts), they stem from a basic life–death discrimination.[67] The environment is therefore made up of named 'things' and tabooed 'non-things' which fall into the 'gaps' between 'things.' Such distinctions must be viewed as cultural, according to Leach, because there are no gaps in the physical world. In this way then normality and abnormality have to be viewed in context, even though the process by which they function to create taboo, ambiguous categories is universal. There are, however, certain similarities and recurring patterns in the mythology of different cultures. For instance, the 'gap' between 'this-world' and 'other-world' is generally bridged by supernatural beings of a highly ambiguous kind (virgin mothers, supernatural monsters, etc.) and are the objects of the most intense taboos, as well as being the most sacred:

> beings of the middle zone (i.e., not gods or men) who often appear in myth as deified ancestors (part man, part god) become 'abnormal' whenever they lose their ambiguity. The mediating hero is, in all religious systems, a being of the middle zone. One aspect of his essential ambiguity is that he (or she) is always, at one and the same time, impossibly virtuous and impossibly sinful; it is a definitional characteristic of the hero that he is 'abnormal when judged by ordinary criteria.'[68]

So being in the 'middle zone' is not necessarily a negative position to be in. If one is able to hold on to the 'essential ambiguity' of being 'impossibly virtuous and impossibly sinful' then one may be viewed as a 'hero' figure. Leach refers to the many Biblical examples of this ambiguous hero principle;

for example, Abraham marrying his half sister, which is incest, and Solomon marrying 700 wives from nations with whom Israelites were forbidden to intermarry—these two transgressions are concerned with the single rule of endogamy, albeit describing the breaking of the rule in different ways. Leach explains that the 'message of the myth is made obliquely by repetitive, yet contrasted, references to the *same* moral injunction which is transgressed in *different* ways.'[69]

This concept of transgressing the boundaries between binary opposites then can be applied to child stars in two ways. Firstly, they fall 'in-between' distinct 'child' or 'adult' categories *in our culture* because of, among other things, their ability to be economically powerful and independent and the fact that they work in the adult world. This could go some way towards explaining the hostility with which their lives are recounted in the press. It could also explain the reification of child stars as 'little angels,' 'heaven sent,' and 'gifts to humanity'—if they are conceptualised as occupying that elevated position between 'this world' and 'other world,' then they are bound to be viewed with awe and reverence. Only when they grow up do they lose their 'abnormality' and so with it their deified status along with their power to both shock and delight. More generally, as described in the previous section on Jungian archetypes, the 'wonder-child' also falls in between the categories of human and supernatural, traditionally possessing a closeness to the divine and a link to the other world from which they have so recently come. This 'in-betweenness' is seen as sacred, whereas the habitation of a category which is between being a child and an adult is seen as accursed, bringing us closer still to the paradox which underlies the status of the child star.

The ambiguous status of the child star which underlies their power as a cultural symbol is demonstrated in a montage of pictures of Shirley Temple and the accompanying text which appeared in *Photoplay* magazine in August 1934. The pictures show Temple displaying a range of expressions and poses ranging from angelic, with her hands pressed together in prayer, to grumpy and from tired to playful. Her status as being between a child and an adult is revealed in the sexual undertones of both the text and some of the pictures. For example, we are told that Temple is cute 'any way you take her' and that she is good at pouting and playing at 'the art of the coquette' with the aside '(they're never too young!)' implying a sexual awareness that renders Temple a fetishised image of purity and innocence. However, the focus on her childlike traits whereby the photographer apparently interrupted her 'romp' in the garden and the description of her as a 'good little girl,' emphasise her childishness, as do the pictures which focus either on her cherubic face or her body wearing little girl clothes.

Temple's status as being a special, other-worldly 'wonder-child' is evident in the reification of her physical appearance and the fascination with her daily activities, and of course the fact that she merits a full-page magazine spread dedicated to showing just how cute she is. Temple's iconic status was almost certainly due to her embodiment of both the sacred (the

beautiful child) and the taboo (the sexualised child), and the power of her image undoubtedly derived from this contradiction.

Only by examining such structural elements of the relationship of the child star to wider cultural and social normative standards is it possible to understand how the child star has become both a victim and an object of hope in our society. I would argue that previous incarnations of child stars have been without pity as the child has signified goodness, strength, purity, and/or divine power. It is symptomatic of our protectionist and scientific attitude towards children that the child star of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has become largely an object of concern, pity, and ridicule. However, the very fact that we demand child stars at all reinforces the powerful role the wonder-child archetype still has to play in our collective sub-conscious.

The next chapter looks at the way in which stories about child stars are told and examines how modern concerns about protecting childhood and child sexuality are presented in traditional narrative structures which seem to generate a preferred reading of the text in which the child star becomes the site of the struggle between good and evil. The subject of the analysis is Charlotte Church, a performer whose image encompasses both the religious connotations of Jung's 'Child' motif as well as the ambiguous power of being a child/adult.

6   The Demonisation of Charlotte Church

This chapter continues the consideration of the child star from a structuralist perspective, as begun in the previous chapter, by examining a range of stories which appeared in the press between 1998 and 2007 about the young Welsh soprano Charlotte 'Voice of an Angel' Church. This span of stories is particularly interesting because it begins with her 'discovery' at the age of twelve in 1998, through her immensely successful classical singing career, to her teenage rebellion which included a rejection of classical music and a falling out with her mother, her reinvention as a sexy siren in 2003, again as a pop star in 2005, and again as an expectant mother in 2007.

I wish to demonstrate how the media coverage of these eventful years in the life of Church encapsulate the way in which contemporary stories about child stars are used both to reinforce normative ideals as to the position of children in society and to express wider concerns about the 'evils' of capitalist culture. The very fact that Church is explicitly set up as an 'angel' in the early days endows her with the power to be the site of the struggle between good and evil which is played out over the ensuing years. I demonstrate how the overall structure of the collection of stories and the characters therein adhere to traditional narrative patterns, which engender certain expectations and explanations of behaviour, which again serve to reinforce the message that there is an important lesson to be learnt from the experiences of child stars. The ability of Charlotte Church to first delight, then shock, then dismay reflects her power as a child star, and it is this power which allows her to become a symbol of corrupted innocence in a mythical-style story which still has relevance in a contemporary social context.

Nietzsche[1] wrote about the modern 'mythless man' who 'hungers after times past and digs and grubs for roots,' trying to find profound meaning in an increasingly secular, rational world in which science has explained away much of the traditional beliefs and ideas which gave shape and purpose to people's lives. Although it may seem that there is no place left for such explanatory stories in contemporary Western culture, the search for meaning continues and with it the attribution of symbolic significance onto certain people, events, and objects. In this light, it certainly seems possible to conceptualise the contemporary media construction of child stars such

as Charlotte Church as manifestations of the eternal, universal need for a wonder-child to inspire joy and a belief in a better future. As Malinowski explains, myths satisfy on a number of fundamental levels and are not simply random primitive explanations for natural phenomena:

> [Myth] is a hard-working, extremely important cultural force . . . a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, even practical requirements.[2]

This structuralist concept of myth as a universal expression of emotion in narrative form which varies in detail from culture to culture but which carries the same essential message is a useful way of approaching stories in our own social context. By considering what underlying themes and meanings inform the media coverage of Charlotte Church's life, I demonstrate that a rich reading of the data is possible which connects the child star to mythical tales and fables which follow predictable and traditional patterns.

To understand the rise and fall of Charlotte Church from a structuralist perspective it is useful to conceptualise her as a modern-day hero facing challenges and obstacles of a timeless nature in the pursuit of the attainment of wisdom and a higher spiritual dimension. At first glance, of course, it is ludicrous to compare the achievements and disappointments of a young Welsh singer with the trials of Hercules or the adventures of Krishna, and it is not my intention to engender such a comparison. However, as Campbell notes in his investigation of the monomyth of 'The Hero':

> when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age.[3]

Campbell demonstrates the universality of mythical and folk stories about heroes throughout history, emanating from every society of which there is a record of their culture. From the ancient Egyptian god Osiris, to Jesus Christ, to Little Red Riding Hood, to Buddha, he claims that the trajectory of the stories follow a pattern which, from a psychoanalytic reading, concurs with a psychological longing to attain wholeness through transformation and ideally involves begetting wisdom which can then be dispersed among the unenlightened of the world. As Campbell explains:

> The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return.[4]

The story of the hero then has several distinct stages which are open to infinite cultural and social variations as well as symbolic interpretation. However, the bare bones of the tale are generally as follows: There is a call

to adventure, to step off the well-worn path into the unknown, which is either heeded immediately or ignored, and an initial obstacle to be overcome which is often surpassed with the help of supernatural aid in some form or another. The initiation begins in earnest in the next stage, which Campbell refers to as the 'Road of Trials,' in which betrayals and temptations challenge the integrity and/or physical strength of the hero. When the hero has been tested and has shown himself/herself to be worthy and has achieved 'at-one-ment,' it is time for the return to society where he/she arrives, transfigured, and teaches the lesson he/she has learned of life renewed.

Although Church's story cannot satisfactorily be fully aligned to the classic hero tale (apart from anything else, her story has not finished yet), several relevant themes and patterns are discernable in the way her story has been presented in the media over the last few years. It is important to point out here that it is not being suggested that the life and experiences of Church are especially 'heroic' or that Church herself is a sage of some description, but that in order to understand why her story has been presented in the particular structure it has it is useful to recognise the need for the hero story to be told again and again in a variety of guises.

STAGE 1: THE CELEBRATION

Church's 'call to adventure' came when she was twelve years old and living in Cardiff with her parents and extended family. The support act to her aunt on a TV talent search programme, Church's extraordinarily beautiful 'adult' soprano voice stole the show, and a manager and a five-album deal with Sony swiftly followed. For the next two years the media exalted and feted Church in a frenzy of adoration. Church's success was a worldwide phenomenon, and her debut album, *Voice of an Angel*, sold 2 million copies in two weeks in the U.K. alone. The incredible success of the young singer was always closely allied to both the religious connotations of her repertoire, which included songs such as Pie Jesu and Ave Maria, and to the 'purity' of her voice. The following article headlines were typical of the adulation which surrounded the young Church as the time, with the line between her *sounding* like an angel and actually *being* an angel becoming blurred as she began to signify the metaphor used to describe her:

> HEAVEN SENT VOICE OF AN ANGEL (*The Herald Sun*, 17 December 1999)
>
> VOICE OF AN ANGEL RINGS ROUND THE WORLD (*Total Wales*, 2 November 1999)
>
> EARTH'S TEEN ANGEL (*The New York Post*, 10 March 1999)
>
> SINGING ANGEL SOARS (*The New York Post*, 21 November 1999)
>
> THE RISE AND RISE OF LITTLE VOICE (*The Daily Telegraph* 19 February 1999)

Charlotte was named a child prodigy and the combination of her age, her voice, and her religious songs created an image for Church that was incredibly successful. In the eighteen months following the release of *Voice of an Angel* Church performed for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles at the opening of the Welsh Assembly, for President Clinton at the White House, and for Pope John Paul II in the Vatican. To add to her iconic status as a divine child she had a meeting with the Pope during which he kissed her grandmother's rosaries and called her 'La Cantante' (the singer).

Newspaper and magazine stories and interviews with Church and her family from this time are overwhelmingly positive. Charlotte is presented as 'just a normal kid,' albeit in extraordinary circumstances:

> As she sits for an interview, Church twirls bubble gum around her fingers, steps over a few teddy bears, and pushes her homework out the way. (*Wall of Sound Magazine*, October 1999)[5]

> Charlotte Church, the little girl from Wales with the big voice from heaven, wants some crispy chicken bits. The thirteen-year-old prodigy has worked from dawn to past her bedtime today, singing for her supper in TV appearances in New York and Los Angeles . . . and now she wants her crispy chicken bits. (*New York Now*, 23 December 1999)[6]

> We had takeaway McDonald's for lunch: 'Cool, fab!' trilled Charlotte when she discovered she could have a Barbie Happy Meal. (*Daily Mail,* 10 November 1999)[7]

> I still go to school, I have sleep-overs at my friends' houses and I spend time with my family. (*Total Wales*, 15 November 1999)[8]

Set in juxtaposition to her talent, Charlotte's 'childishness' and 'normality' become fascinating in the stories which are littered with references to her childlike comments, behaviour, and possessions. The paradox of the child star who is 'bigger than big and smaller than small' could not be more apt when describing the construction of Church in the first two years of her fame and is encapsulated in this description of a performance by Church at a huge international event:

> She comes on in a striped, floor-length gown whose adult formality only serves to emphasise her youth. Then the orchestra begins and from her tiny frame emerges a voice of startling maturity . . . You can just feel 18,000 hearts melt at the wonderful contrast between the chatty kid with the Cardiff accent, and the diva with the glorious voice. (*Daily Mail*, 10 November 1999)[9]

Images of Church which accompanied articles and interviews at this early stage of her career also highlighted her innocence and childishness. For example, a picture in a classical music magazine shows Church barefoot and beaming, hugging an enormous teddy bear. Her smallness is emphasised by

positioning her next to the oversized toy, and her immaturity is signified by her proximity to this prop. That she is cuddling him from behind highlights her vulnerability, and the overall effect of the picture is the emphasis of her 'little girl-ness.' However, the accompanying text demonstrates the greatness of her talent and ambition, reading: 'Church triumphant: "I'd really like to sing Madame Butterfly, or Mimi or Tosca at La Scala and get a standing ovation."'[10] This is clearly not what we would conventionally expect an eleven-year-old child to say, especially one who seems so at home with teddy bears and the whole business of being a child. Therefore, the picture and the text work together to create an image of Charlotte as both childlike and mature, a combination which positions her outside the 'normal' and yet deriving power from the very ambiguity of her status.

Other images focus exclusively on her innocent beauty and the religious connotations of her purity and giftedness. The angelic framing of early Hollywood child stars is revisited in pictures of Church at this time, with hands clasped together as if in prayer, wearing white and gazing upwards—a golden child who represents all that is good about the world and humanity. Church's status as a 'wonder-child' is confirmed again and again in similar ways through texts and pictures at this time, and her talent for beautiful singing is unquestionably linked to her having a beautiful nature, thus elevating her to the status of a higher grade human being, or, in celebrity terms, a 'star.' Her 'bigness' resides in her voice and within the rules of her media construction; this seems to define her morality, character, and future. As the following glowing report of Church's voice seems to imply: Surely the voice of an angel must belong to an angel?

> When she bursts into song . . . we are instantly captivated by her truly extraordinary voice and her transparent joy in singing. I only hope that when I hear angels sing on the other side of the grave they sound half as good as this. (*The Reporter USA*, 23 June 1999)[11]

Even given her 'extraordinary' talent, Church is presented in media stories as an unspoilt, natural child, rather than as a novelty act or precocious brat, further emphasising her quasi-religious status as a 'gift from god' who has something marvellous to share with the world. Indeed, the following quote is reminiscent in style of the adoring hyperbole which surrounded the child stars of the Hollywood Child Star era in the 1920s and 30s:

> She's amazing, this child-diva. More child than diva, thank the Lord, and after the year she's had, it's a relief to find a sunny, guileless young girl wriggling around in her chair instead of the monster I was half-dreading. (*The Telegraph*, 19 February 1999)[12]

Given her ambiguous status as a child with an adult singing voice, the childlike qualities which Church displays are clearly here seen as something

unexpected, wonderful, and exciting. The terminology used to describe this encounter further reinforces the fairytale imagery—the child is 'amazing,' the journalist was 'half-dreading' meeting her, she could so easily have been a 'monster' and yet she was 'sunny' and 'guileless.' The underlying message seems to be that the forces of evil have not yet reached her, she is still safely ensconced in childhood and so we are free to enjoy her in her 'natural' state. Church is still 'pure' and hasn't yet been polluted by the outside world, a fact that is confirmed by emphasis on her position as still very much under the protection and control of her family. To this end she is quoted as describing her unusually frequent contact with her extended family:

> When we're home, I see my auntie, my uncle, my grandmother, my grand-father, my cousin, my mum and my dad, every day. Then I'll see my Auntie Frances, my Auntie Margaret, Rachel, probably Alison, Susan, Paul, Linda, probably once or twice a week. They're all cousins and second cousins. We are very family-orientated. (*The Telegraph*, 19 February 1999)[13]

Church's life is described as a 'fairy-tale,' and her parents are presented as supportive, protective, and very much acting in the best interests of their child. Interestingly, no mention is made at this point of the fact that James Church is Charlotte's step-father and that he has two other children at home in Wales. Charlotte is always referred to as their only child. Her mother, Maria, is described as 'sensible' and 'pretty, small, neat with dark wavy hair.'[14] They are at pains to emphasise that they are not interested in their own gains from Charlotte's career and that Charlotte is a 'normal' teenager:

> All I'm working for is my daughter's happiness and I'm proud of that. (James Church in *Daily Mail*, 10 November 1999)[15]

> When asked if Charlotte is still a typical teenager, Maria is adamant in her reply: 'Honestly, honestly, yes she is . . . She eats junk food, goes shopping with her friends, has to tidy her room and gets told off when she's naughty. Fame hasn't changed Charlotte.' (*Total Wales,* 15 November 1999)[16]

> None of this was planned, so there was never a case of pushing Charlotte . . . it was always Charlotte's choice. This all kind of fell in our lap. So we've just always supported and encouraged her. (Maria Church on *www.Ivillage.com*, 17 November 1999)[17]

It is interesting that Maria Church refers to Charlotte's 'discovery' as an unplanned chance event as this is precisely the nature of the hero's call to adventure. As Campbell explains:

> A blunder—apparently the merest chance—reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood.[18]

It is towards this unsuspected hostile world which Charlotte moves as she approaches adolescence and cracks begin to show in her relationship with both the media and her audience.

STAGE 2: THE TRANSFORMATION

As Marina Warner[19] points out in her study of the form and function of fairy tales: 'metamorphosis defines the fairytale' even more so than the happy ending, and the next stage of Church's journey is based around the key transformation of Church as she reached adolescence—always a challenging transition for a child star. The following kinds of newspaper headlines were common to articles about her at this time which focussed on her clothes, hair, and makeup:

> GLAMOROUS NEW IMAGE FOR CHARLOTTE (*Total Wales*, 5 May 2000)
>
> OUT ON THE TOWN CHARLOTTE AGED 15 (GOING ON 19) (*Daily Mail*, 25 July 2001)

A noticeable change in tone is apparent in such articles which document Church's change from child into young woman, with the adjective 'sexy' used for the first time to describe her appearance after she collected a Classical Music award in May 2000 (aged fourteen):

> She has ditched the cute plaits for a layered hairstyle, and her pretty face, which was once free of make-up, is now usually made up with coloured eye shadow and red lipstick. With her new sexy appearance, she could be mistaken for a seventeen year old. (*Total Wales*, 5 May 2000)[20]

The wistful nostalgia for the 'angelic' child she so recently was is evident in the lament that her 'pretty' face which was 'once free of make-up' is now laden with it—a sign of mature sexuality, tawdriness, and falseness—a far cry from the 'natural' charms of the Charlotte of just a few months ago. The message is clear—the 'angel' is being corrupted by all the evils in society. Just as Church had all the hope and joy of childhood projected onto her for the benefit of her world-weary audience as a twelve-year-old, now at fourteen she represents the fight between good (innocence, purity, naivety) and evil (mass culture, money, and sex). An article in the *Daily Mail* in July 2001 makes this contrast explicit by placing a photo of the twelve-year-old Charlotte in her school uniform next to a picture of her dressed up to go out aged fifteen. There is no doubt about the corrupting influences on Charlotte in the story:

> With hair transformed using tongs and extensions into a frizzy mass of ringlets and make-up which includes lipstick, gloss and smoky eyes she has clearly

developed that common adolescent desire to fast-forward her appearance . . . The girl whose operatic voice has entertained the Queen, the Pope and a US president has shifted her musical tastes as well as her dress style. Eminem and Destiny's Child are her current idols . . . With a £10million fortune Miss Church will have little difficulty maintaining fashion requirements. (*Daily Mail*, 25 July 2001)[21]

Church's departure from her childhood self is also emphasised in terms of her distance from the family-oriented child she so recently was and the close relationship to her parents which represented her protection from the corrupting influences of the outside world:

Even her parents must struggle to recognise Charlotte Church aged 15½ as the child singing prodigy sold as *The Voice of an Angel*. (*Daily Mail*, 25 July 2001)[22]

It is indicative of the media shift in attitude towards Church that in the preceding quote Charlotte is described as having been 'sold' as having the voice of an angel, a subtle differentiation from earlier articles which seemed to accept that she in fact *had* a voice of an angel because she essentially *was* an angel. Sexuality, popular culture, and money seem to be the culprits here, responsible for the transformation of Church from an 'angel' to a disappointingly 'normal,' shallow, predictable teenager. A certain contempt for teenagers and adolescents is barely concealed in these extracts reflecting, I would argue, a wider distaste and fear of this age group in general in our society. It would seem that this article and others like it are meant to be read as a lament for childhood and that Church has become here a scapegoat for the fear generated by the inevitable movement of children away from adult control and towards independence.

Interestingly, this transformation in Charlotte's appearance coincided with a well-publicised court case in which her sacked former manager, Jonathan Shalit, sued the Churches for £4million. The negative publicity surrounding the case focussed on Charlotte's mother, who was described as 'fiery' and driven only by 'the pursuit and retention of money.'[23] Mrs Church was said to have invented spurious reasons to justify firing the loyal and hardworking Shalit, who claims to have masterminded Charlotte's rise to international stardom. The media were quick to re-cast Maria Church as the archetypal pushy parent:

GREED DROVE MOTHER OF CHILD STAR, COURT TOLD (*The Guardian*, 22 November 2000)

and for the first time, James Church is referred to as the star's 'adoptive father,' further deconstructing the image of family cohesion and child-centred togetherness which characterised earlier profiles. Indeed Charlotte's

step-sister, Elisha, creates a Cinderella-esque image when she describes family life at the Church's:

> I think Maria did push Charlotte into a lot of things. I don't think Charlotte had much of a childhood. It was always dancing, singing or extra lessons. Whenever we went around she would be upstairs practising the piano. (*The Independent*, 21 February 2002)[24]

The stereotypical 'pushy-parent' is an almost ubiquitous character in media narratives about child stars, and one which seems to fit with the figure of the 'tyrant-monster' as identified by Campbell in the mythologies, folk traditions, and legends of the world. The tyrant–monster is described as avid for the greedy rights of 'my and mine' and is 'driven by the impulses to egocentric self-aggrandisement.'[25] Indeed, the image of Maria Church managing and manoeuvring her daughter's career and enjoying access to people, places, and a lifestyle which would have been utterly unattainable to her except through her daughter's extraordinary success and talent almost defines her as an unsavoury character regardless of her potentially blameless intentions.

Campbell's description of the motivation of the tyrant-monster seems particularly apt in reference to the pushy parent who is preoccupied both with protecting their protégée and also caught up in (perhaps even corrupted by) the world of riches and fame which such close association brings:

> alert at every hand to meet and battle back anticipated aggressions of his [sic] environment, which are primarily the reflection of the uncontrollable impulses to acquisition within himself.[26]

However, even the strength of the 'tyrant-monster' fighting her corner couldn't protect Charlotte from the inevitable fall from grace which was to follow her sensational success as a child star as she grew up and away from her angelic image.

STAGE 3: THE DISINTEGRATION

> THE FALL FROM GRACE OF MISS CHURCH (*The Independent*, 6 December 2002)

> CHARLOTTE OPENS WITH TEARS AND TANTRUMS (*Daily Mail*, 5 December 2002)

These newspaper headlines refer to the disastrous start to Charlotte's U.S. tour in 2002 when she had an 'emotional breakdown' at Gatwick because she did not want to leave her boyfriend, was unreliable and distracted during rehearsals, and, in true child-star fashion, threw a tantrum when asked

to meet a group of relatives of cast members, apparently saying; 'F*** this, I didn't agree to no meet and greet,' before storming off. To further demonise Church, the papers were also delighted to include the information that the 'waiting party included a handicapped child and the wheel-chair bound mother of the Royal Philharmonic's conductor.'[27] Described in the tabloids as the 'Blue Angel' due to her strong language, Charlotte was portrayed as rude, ungrateful, and greedy—effectively she was presented as the ultimate spoiled brat, a mutation of the beautiful child she had so recently been. Details such as the following added to the negative image of Church as a monstrous egotist:

> Backstage she demanded a steady stream of chocolate cake and Italian ham. (*The Mirror*, 6 December 2002)[28]

That Church also fell out with her mother at this time and was involved with her first serious boyfriend (the unpleasant Steven Johnson, who later made thousands selling kiss-and-tell stories about Charlotte to the papers) cast Charlotte even further into the wilderness in terms of her public persona and her professional image. Being termed a 'former prodigy' (*The Mirror*, 6 December 2002) heralded both the final nail in the coffin of her golden childhood and the beginning of a life trying to either live up to, or escape from, her former incarnation.

The papers were also keen to report that her fans were deserting her ('thousands of empty seats . . . poor ticket sales'[29]), further cementing the image of Charlotte alone and isolated in a less-than-welcoming adult world. The 'Road of Trials' had indeed begun for Charlotte, and it seemed to stretch far into the distance in front of her.

Although she kept a low profile musically for the next couple of years, Charlotte was rarely out of the papers due to her lively social life and relationship troubles, including her betrayal by Steven Johnson:

> CHARLOTTE IN TEARS AS SHE DUMPS LOVER (*News of the World*, 7 December 2003)

There was also a huge amount of publicity surrounding Charlotte's eighteenth birthday when she gained access to the £16m fortune she had earned as a child. In a fairy-tale-type detail, the turning point in her life was identified as midnight:

> As the clock struck midnight and Charlotte Church turned 18, it was all change for the angel-voiced singer. (*Sunday Express*, 22 February 2004)

The change, predictably, involved alcohol and sex—the ultimate corrupting influences on a former 'angel':

> At midnight . . . she celebrated with a cigarette and her first legal swig of champagne. Several glasses later she hit the dance floor for a steamy clinch with boyfriend Kyle Johnson, 19. (*Sunday Express* 22 February 2004)[30]

Church is presented as a sex siren and a woman who has clearly moved far away from her innocent child star image. Indeed, she is quoted in the *News of the World* as describing her new boyfriend as being 'very sexy' and 'brilliant at everything—if you know what I mean.'

   Pictures of Church slumped against her limousine after losing her footing outside the nightclub where she had been celebrating her birthday were all over the papers the next day, accompanied by gleeful captions around the theme of 'fallen angel'; for example:

> This is the moment the Voice of an Angel became a fallen angel. Charlotte Church's ungainly tumble came on a fourteen-hour booze bender to mark her eighteenth birthday. (*News of the World*, 22 February 2004)[31]

> Charlotte the angel turns 18 and falls from grace. (*Sunday Express,* 22. February 2004)[32]

In a humorous, yet telling, response to a question about what she was going to spend her money on, Charlotte declared that she wanted to buy a '£1m ruby-studded bra.'[33] This brings to mind the tale of the red shoes by Hans Christian Anderson which the little girl wished for with all her heart, and then was danced to death in, unable to take them off, or even Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz and her red slippers which were to magically take her home to childhood, protection, and safety. The red theme followed Charlotte over the next few months as she posed for seductive pictures and gave an in-depth interview to *The Face* magazine. *The Mail on Sunday* was indignant, calling her SCARLETT CHARLOTTE and lamenting the death of her 'innocent child star image'[34] thereby portraying Charlotte's sexuality as inherently, and permanently, deviant.

STAGE 4: THE ALIENATION

Subsequent stories involving Charlotte's 'binge drinking' and 'cavorting' with various boyfriends paint a picture of a rather sad and lonely figure as well as someone as far removed from the image of an angel as it is possible to be:

> CHARLOTTE LURCH: BOOZED UP STAR BACK IN GUTTER—Drunken Charlotte Church crashed to the ground outside a nightclub in the early hours of yesterday—following another marathon boozing session. (*Daily Star* 16 December 2004)[35]

Figure 1   *Daily Star* cartoon, www.scottclissold.com.

> The *Voice of an Angel* star ended up staggering around the streets of Cardiff
> alone in the early hours last Sunday after spending the night knocking back
> vodka and Red Bull with pals. (*News of the World*, 1 August 2004)[36]

The way such behaviour served to alienate Church's loyal fan base from
when she was a child who represented the ultimate symbol of purity and
hope is encapsulated in this cartoon (Fig. 1) which appeared in the *Daily
Star* on the same day as the preceding story:

The cartoon shows Church making a special appearance in church to
sing Christmas carols to the local community. The conservative, elderly con-
gregation are confused and bemused by her slovenly appearance and drunk-
enness, and the vicar comments to the organist that 'we should've hidden
the communion wine.'

The cartoon works on several levels and makes much of the ironic inap-
propriateness of Church's surname, which was in the past so apt due to her
religious songs and innocent, angelic image. By placing her in a church, the
contrast of her current persona to the religious connotations of her previ-
ous childhood image is made stark. The way in which Church is seen to
have desecrated something sacred that she used to represent is highlighted
in the way she is shown wearing a crucifix as a fashion accessory and by
the teenage hip-hop style clothes and trainers she is wearing—a far cry
from the 'Sunday best' type clothes deemed suitable for church/Church.
Her hair is pulled back tight, her midriff is showing, and she is wearing
large hoop earrings, aligning her with a certain working-class image of

young womanhood and an overall style which is more aligned to street culture than to classical music. She is holding a bottle of beer and a cigarette in one hand and a microphone in the other and looks more like a karaoke singer than a 'star.' The overall impression of the image is that of a lager lout who has trespassed into a church during a religious service, much to the bemusement of the congregation. The fact that they were expecting Charlotte *'Voice of an Angel'* Church, the former child prodigy, further reinforces the general shock expressed in the media that she did not quite turn out the way everyone supposedly expected. That Church is apparently drunk on communion wine comments further on the way she has exploited her success as an innocent angelic child to fund her current debouched lifestyle.

Charlotte was not only alienated from her original fan base at this stage in her career, but also from her contemporaries—the other teenagers in her hometown of Cardiff. The strength of bad feeling and jealousy towards Charlotte, as described by her in the following quote from an interview at this time, is quite shocking and not a little sad and further renders her a figure of pity and controversy:

> People ring me up all the time . . . and they'll say; "You're a fat little Welsh slag." Strangers. And I'm, "Bug off!" I'm changing my number again, today. Everyone wants to fight with me. In shops, clubs, even down the UCI [cinema]. (*The Face*, May 2003)[37]

Interestingly, this alienation can also be related to the hero myth narrative, whereby, 'the child of destiny has to face a long period of obscurity. This is a time of extreme danger, impediment or disgrace.'[38] This stage of Church's career can certainly be seen as consisting of obscurity and danger, and if her story should end here it would indeed serve as a cautionary tale—the little girl who got too much too soon and destroyed herself on the proceeds. However, this is more of a fairy tale than a cautionary tale, and Church's story is far from over at this point. As Warner points out, anything can happen in fairy tales, and 'this very boundlessness serves the moral purpose of the tales, which is precisely to teach where boundaries lie.'[39]

Indeed, as Warner explains, the essential genre of the fairy tale is characterised by 'heroic optimism,' and Church's subsequent reinvention of herself as a glamorous pop-star is explored in the next section. That a period of alienation should lead to a heroic return to 'stardom' can be read as a modern version of an age-old narrative theme whereby the 'hero' returns from the wilderness full of new energy and understanding. However, as is demonstrated, it seems that the return did not herald the end of Church's 'Road of Trials' but simply opened up the possibility for more exploitation of Charlotte as a site for the mythical ongoing struggle between good and evil.

STAGE 5: THE RETURN

As noted earlier, during 2005 Church relaunched her career, this time with a raunchy pop music CD which did well in the charts. Her image was also revamped, and she appeared in music videos dressed in basques and knee-high boots, causing a stir amongst her original fans who had enjoyed her earlier classical music and previous incarnation as a child prodigy. To add to Charlotte's celebrity status she got involved with Welsh rugby star Gavin Henson, and the two of them became stock fodder for gossip magazines and tabloids for months on end.

However, the overriding power of Church to generate press interest was still based on her ambiguous status as being both naive and experienced, a victim and a sinner, and, most importantly, a child and an adult. Stories about the singer continued to rely on this duality of her constructed identity to convey the message that the former child star was still having a difficult time growing up. For example, one story which appeared with the article headline:

> ANGEL'S FLAT IS A MESSY HELL HOLE (*Metro*, 29 June 2005)

would not have been newsworthy for any celebrity other than Church. The article describes how Charlotte had moved out of her luxury flat because she couldn't be bothered to clean it and instead moved in with her 'nana.' She is quoted as saying:

> It's been nice. Nana does all my washing and rings me to say, 'I've got cottage pie on, love, hurry up and get home.' (*Metro*, 29 June 2005)

This story works to reinforce the image of Church as a spoilt child who is trying to act like a sophisticated adult (she bought a 'luxury flat') and failing. The reporting of her continuing reliance on her family and her immature and irresponsible attitude towards the more mundane aspects of adult life perpetuate the idea that Church really is still a child and thus creates an environment whereby stories about her drinking, smoking, and sex life have maximum impact.

Indeed, stories about Church's apparent excesses continued to dominate her press coverage at this time. For example, Kyle Johnson's exposé of his intimate relationship with ex-girlfriend Charlotte in the *News of The World* was headlined, unsurprisingly,

> IN BED WITH AN ANGEL (*News of the World*, 27 February 2005)

In stark contrast to Charlotte's original 'angel' image, this story 'uncovered' the 'real' Charlotte as an insatiable seductress, thereby serving to cast her out from her childlike identity once and for all, but also deriving its

scandalous shock value from the fact that she was so recently an 'angelic' child. Another exposé by another former boyfriend entitled

CHARLOTTE THE DRUG DIVA (*The Mail on Sunday* 11 September 2005)

focused on a different arena of transgression—Church's alleged drug taking—and again derived maximum impact from frequent reference to her angelic past:

> She is famous for her drink binges . . . now her former lover reveals the *Voice of an Angel* star's nights of cannabis, amyl-nitrate and passion. (*The Mail on Sunday,* 11 September 2005)[40]

The accompanying picture of Church dragging on a cigarette and surrounded by wine glasses further reinforces this image of her as having been tempted by vice and on the rocky path to self-destruction. Charlotte's drinking is also deemed newsworthy as it contributes to her construction as a pure angel who has become a tarnished, sinful, and 'wild' due to the corrupting influences of alcohol:

> the former child prodigy's 19th birthday party . . . lasted seventy-two hours. Her favourite tipple is vodka and Red Bull, plus white wine, champagne and rum cocktails . . . Friends believe that at present Charlotte is untameable. 'She's utterly wild, completely out of control,' says a source. (*Daily Mail*, 19 March 2005)[41]

Even Charlotte's supposed 'fairytale romance' with the Welsh rugby star is presented in the media as a sham with constant speculation as to when he is going to 'dump' Church for someone else:

> CHARLOTTE'S PAIN AS SHE AND GAVIN HIT THE ROCKS (*new!* 19 September 2005),

with her childish insecurity and jealousy being cited as the reason they are 'headed for meltdown.' Phrases such as she 'threw a tantrum . . . when she found Gav chatting to an unidentified blonde,' and 'she burst into tears and yelled' continue to subtly reinforce Church's childlike persona as a spoilt, immature brat, and the accompanying photographs of Charlotte looking glamorous and polished next to pictures of her looking 'bedraggled' and 'tired' present an image of someone who cannot cope with the strains of adult life and who is on the edge of breaking down. At this point, the return of Charlotte as a wise, authentic adult who has learned the lessons of her early extraordinary experiences was, it seems, yet to occur.

Despite some positive publicity celebrating Church's 'down to earth personality' and 'healthy appetite,' throughout 2006 and 2007 the media largely

persisted in ridiculing Church, describing her high-profile new chat show as 'truly terrible,'[42] and mocking her 'curvy' figure. On Church's twenty-first-birthday, one tabloid newspaper drew attention yet again to the disappointing juxtaposition of the angel-voiced child and the woman she had grown into:

> It's our turn to do the singing today—as Welsh warbler Charlotte Church celebrates her 21st birthday. We've watched the tiny girl with the big voice grow into, er, a big girl with a tiny career. (*The Sun*, 21 February 2007)[43]

The strength of the constructed image of Church as a corrupted innocent is evident in the following abridged article. In an extension of the fairy-tale dynamic behind the on-going narrative about Church, she appears to be presented here as a spiteful 'witch' character in contrast to Kylie Minogue's blameless 'pop princess,' who is not only 'dignified' but also a survivor of cancer, thus earning her the position of returning hero, a status which the media continued to deny to Church:

> CHARLOTTE IS SO VILE-Y TO KYLIE
>
> The contrast between classy Kylie and chavvy Charlotte Church could not have been more obvious as they both went out in Manchester on Saturday. Kylie making her first public appearance since she fell ill earlier this month, treated her staff to a meal at the Room restaurant, and carried herself with dignity. But Charlotte got the red mist while on a bender . . . When she was told Kylie was out and about down the road she said: "I couldn't give a fat f***." What a charmer. Breast cancer survivor Kylie has been laid up in a Manchester hotel room since she was struck down with flu and had to abandon a concert at the city's MEN Arena halfway through on January 13. (*The Sun*, 22 January 2007)[44]

A key development in Church's media (and personal) story occurred in March 2007 when Church announced that she and boyfriend Gavin Henson were expecting their first child. The change in Church's behaviour was another chance for the media to recount her 'hellraising days' and also to interpret the pregnancy as a period of redemption for Church's 'wild' past, as in the following quote:

> Unlike previous holidays, this trip has been notable for Charlotte's abstemious behaviour. Since arriving last week, the former smoker has not touched a cigarette and is also taking care not to stay in the sun too long. And there's another big change from her hellraising days. "Charlotte hasn't touched a drop of booze all holiday—she's been on fruity, non-alcoholic cocktails and bottled water only," the source said. (*Daily Mail*, 9 April 2007)[45]

However, it seems that Church herself may have resisted the redemptive 'good mother' image offered to her by the press, suggesting she may have

had a vested interest in keeping the 'hellraiser' image alive. For example, she is quoted as saying:

> If you're a woman, you're supposed to stay sober until your kids grow up. That's not fair. Just because Britney [Spears] has the odd night out doesn't make her a bad mum. She's still allowed to have a good time every now and again. It would be different if it was every night." (*The Daily Star*, 21 June 2007)[46]

Even more saliently, in an interview in 2005 Church admits how useful her media 'bad girl' image has been in helping her make the transition from child prodigy to adult pop star:

> As much as I can't stand what's written about me, I think it will really help with the transition. None of it was planned, none of it was orchestrated, but I don't think people will be expecting another classical album after all that palaver. (*Observer Music Monthly*, May 22 2005)[47]

And, ironically, it seems that Church has had a begetting of wisdom of sorts in her admirably pragmatic approach to the distorted image of herself which has been created by the media over the years, as the following, telling comment indicates:

> 'People say, "Does it bug you—fallen angel?" But I've made a lot of money off the "angel" thing, so how can I complain?' (*Observer Music Monthly*, May 22 2005)[48]

THE FALLEN ANGEL: A MODERN MYTH

As demonstrated in the preceding analysis, it has been very much in the interests of the tabloids to continue to generate stories about Church as a distorted child living in a cruel adult world because, as explored in the previous analysis of Leach's explanation of taboo, this image is particularly shocking to us in this culture at this time. That Church was publicly identified as a 'star' and 'angel' at such a young age transfused her with a power to surpass ordinary boundaries of expectation and experience and provided her with a cultural significance beyond her actual personhood. This significance has rendered every action she takes to be imbued with meaning deriving from her original persona as an 'angel child.' I have argued that it was this setting apart of Church as different and special at an early age which aligned her with universal, mythological tales of the 'hero' which, as Campbell describes, appear in every society of which there is a record of their culture.

   According to Campbell, the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is 'a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return.'[49] In relation to Church's story as

constructed in the media over the past few years, it has been demonstrated how her early chance discovery was presented as her 'separation' from the 'normal' course of her life and that this began a journey down a 'Road of Trials' during which she was tempted and betrayed. This is the so-called 'initiation' stage of the hero tale whereby the hero is tested to see if he or she is strong enough to fulfil their destiny, as Campbell describes it:

> The myths agree that an extraordinary capacity is required to face and survive such experiences.[50]

Through reference to newspaper stories about Church it has been shown how her forays into sexual relationships, drinking, and drug taking were used to create an image of her as a 'fallen angel' who gave into temptation and also as a victim of painful betrayals from false friends and ex-lovers. The transformation of Charlotte from an angelic child to a hardened and yet still vulnerable adult has also been a profound story of one individual's journey from innocence to experience, which is again part of a deeper narrative pattern which informs all stories about reaching maturity. In this sense, Charlotte's story has probably had such power to attract interest because her 'heroic' narrative actually coincided with her rite of passage of adolescence, making her public, often painful, experience of growing up a magnified version of the universal journey into adulthood and independence. As Jung explains, myths involving the 'Child' archetype are particularly powerful because of their relevance to the struggle to endure, grow, and succeed which is shared by all people:

> In all 'child' myths the 'child' is on the one hand delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and in continual danger of extinction, while on the other he [sic] possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity . . . the 'child' is a personification of vital forces quite outside the limited range of our one-sided conscious mind . . . It represents the strongest, the most ineluctable urge in every being, namely the urge to realise itself.[51]

In the very best traditions of mythological regeneration, 'the hero returns transfigured and teaches the lesson he [sic] has learned of life renewed,'[52] and it has been suggested here that Church's media-savvy attitude to her constructed image, and her ability to manipulate that image for her own ends, is a type of wisdom which is truly expedient in the celebrity-obsessed, media-saturated culture of contemporary Western society. The alternative of a lifetime spent constantly trying to shake off her distorted childlike image seems too harsh a destiny for someone who brought so much joy to others in her childhood. After all, as Campbell explains:

> The conclusion of the childhood cycle is the return or recognition of the hero, when, after the long period of obscurity his [sic] true character is revealed.[53]

Reference has also been made throughout the analysis to the similarity of certain elements of Church's story to the characters and plots of the fairy-tale genre. According to Propp's[54] study of transformations in folk tales, the fairy tale establishes a narrative form which is central to all story-telling whereby the tale is structured by the functions the characters play in the plot. Due to the fact that the actual 'number of functions is extremely small' Propp demonstrates how the basic actions of characters in fairytales remain constant in the course of the plot, while everything else can vary so that, for example:

> The sending on the search, and the departure, are constants. The sender and the leaver, the motivation for the sending etc are variables.[55]

Propp explains that the way tales change over time (their transformations) reflects changes in culture, everyday life, and religion and yet their basic function and structure remains the same and cannot be understood without reference to the human context in which the tale exists. Propp lists many possible transformations which occur in fairy tales as they are adapted to the specific cultural context in which they are re-told, including reduction or amplification of various details or motifs, substitution of certain elements for others, and intensification and weakening of stages of the plot. In relation to Church's story it is clear how the basic narrative structure concurs with the classic fairy-tale story of a child being chosen for some reason, called to adventure, departing their old life, and spending time in the 'dark forest' of obstacles until they reach a place of safety, having been transformed by their experience.

The reduction and amplification of certain details of the story are interesting to identify as they locate the story in a contemporary Western context and ensure it has meaning for a new audience. For example, the adventure that one has to be special to be called upon now appears to be being famous. Church was not chosen to marry the Prince or have magical powers. No, the ultimate fairy-tale experience these days is to be 'discovered,' plucked from obscurity and appear on television.[56] The role of the wicked stepmother in Church's tale (or 'tyrant monster' in Campbell's terminology) was reduced to a merely simmering contempt of Mrs Church's 'pushy stage mother' identity due to the fact that the evil forces in this tale were already characterised as being the vices of the age, namely: alcohol, drugs, and sex. The terrors which haunted Charlotte's experience of being lost in the dark woods were not wolves or witches, but bottles and cigarettes, ex-lovers and false friends. The intensification of the temptations which led Charlotte off the safe path and down the road to untold danger and destruction highlights wider social fears surrounding children growing up too quickly, getting in with the 'wrong crowd,' falling prey to dangerous substances, becoming sexually active too soon, and so on. Charlotte's family, and especially her grandmother, in this transformation become representative of the safe haven she has left behind,

fulfilling our notion of the family home as a protected space and the only appropriate and secure location for a child in a malevolent world. Whether there will be a classic fairy-tale happy ending for Church remains to be seen (at the time of writing she is apparently planning to get married in a castle[57]), but the power of her narrative to continue to interest the reading public suggests that her story of 'little girl lost' in a cruel, debouched world is one which still demands to be told.

The aim of the preceding analysis was to demonstrate the mythical structure inherent in the media construction of stories about child stars. By using Charlotte Church as a case study, it was possible to trace her story as told by the press over several key years and to identify patterns and themes which characterised and shaped her portrayal. The genres both of fairy tale and the mythical story of the hero were shown to inform and structure the trajectory of Church's media-constructed narrative, thus reinforcing a preferred reading of Charlotte as a symbolic site of the moral struggle between the innocence of childhood and the evils of the adult world.

THE CHILD STAR FROM A STRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE

This chapter and the previous one have explored the phenomena of the child star from a structuralist perspective in order to understand the origins of the power of this cultural figure.

Firstly, I explored the relevance of Jung's archetype of the 'wonder-child' to the modern-day construction of the child star. Taking Jung's idea that the recurring image of the heroic child in myth and fable is a manifestation of a structural element of the psyche which generates our need for wholeness and fulfilment, I demonstrated how pictures and descriptions of child stars can be understood as part of this universal phenomena. The way that constructions of child stars, particularly during the Hollywood child-star era of the 1920s and 30s, drew on characteristics of the Christ child in order to elevate the young actors and actresses to a reified status was described, and enduring traits of these modern-day archetypes of child stars were demonstrated as still being discernable in contemporary preferences for child stars to be 'small yet big' and also to be 'natural' in their persona and performances. The power of the child star was identified as residing in their ability to represent this deep human need for a symbol of natural goodness with a connection to the divine, a symbol which has historically and culturally nearly always taken the form of a 'special' child.

I went on to explore how the power of child stars can also be understood as emanating from the ambiguous position they inhabit 'in between' both childhood and adulthood and between this world and the divine. Using Edmund Leach's work on transgression and taboo as a basis for the analysis it was demonstrated how 'shocking' stories about child stars follow a process of castigation of the 'abnormal' which is a universal structural feature

of the way meaning is constructed in stories and myths. The resulting status of the 'abnormal' being as both accursed and sacred was related to the contemporary construction of the child star as being both a figure of pity and admiration.

Finally, in this chapter, the analysis of media reports and articles about Charlotte Church over a period of several years brought together the themes of the 'wonder-child' and the child star as being both sacred and cursed, as well as demonstrating the timeless nature of preferred narrative structures in stories about exceptional children.

Taken together these three strands of analysis seem to say something rather important about the power of child stars and how their meaning is structured in our society. Jung's archetype of the 'wonder-child' provides a universal symbolic category to which child stars appear to belong, and as such they can be understood as part of an ancient and ongoing tradition of heroic children whose power resides in their significance as symbols of wholeness and futurity. Furthermore, applying Leach's theory of cognitive categorisation to the way in which child stars are positioned in our culture as ambiguous and transgressive beings suggests another dimension to the power of the child star. As inhabitants of the 'middle-zone' between both the states of childhood and adulthood, and also, in reference to the 'wonder-child' archetype, between this world and the divine, child stars carry with them the power to shock and to delight. Child stars, it seems, share with traditional heroic figures the 'essential ambiguity' of being 'impossibly virtuous and impossibly sinful' and with it the power to rise beyond their material being into a position of cultural significance. The universal need for stories to be told about such individuals was demonstrated through the analysis of media narratives surrounding Charlotte Church. That the stories about Church were structured in such a way as to reinforce the 'monomyth of the hero' serves to further reinforce the conceptualisation of the child star as a powerful and significant figure in our culture.

Through using a broadly structuralist approach in this chapter and the preceding one, I have demonstrated that the phenomena of child stars cannot be understood through conventional discourse analysis alone and that there is a story to be told beyond the text itself which informs and shapes our understanding of such individuals. The advantages of using both approaches to understand the complexity of the cultural significance of the child star are reflected on in the conclusion.

7   Conclusion

The two key questions relating to child stars posed at the beginning of this book were quite simple: Why do we have child stars? And why are former child stars so frequently ridiculed and denigrated in the press? I investigated these questions through an analysis of media stories and self-told accounts of child stardom from newspapers, magazines, books, and web sites through a dual approach which explored both the powerlessness and power of the child star in our culture. What follows is a summary of those findings, along with an identification of other key issues which were brought up by the research. I go on to discuss these themes in relation to wider concerns about children and childhood in contemporary society and explain the significance of the child star as a reference point for understanding the complexity of the current status of Western childhood.

The book took as a starting point the particular casting of the child star as both deviant and adored in Western society and explored the way in which a certain idealised version of childhood has been constructed over the last two centuries. Having established the antecedents to our current understanding of the 'normal' child, child stars were identified as a specific category of children who fall outside this homogenous category and who are therefore seen as some of the 'failures' of childhood. The genre of biographical and autobiographical writing about and by former child stars was shown to complement this normative standard of childhood by reinforcing the idea that child stars have unhappy childhoods and much misfortune as adults. Research into the experiences of other children whose childhoods have fallen outside the acceptable 'normal' boundaries was explored, and it was found that exceptional early achievers in other fields such as academia are generally spared both the expectation of adult disaster and the hostility which seems to accompany child stars of the stage and screen. Through reference to research on the politics of innocence and the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood, the reason for this negative construction of child stars was identified as being due to their association with the 'eroticisation of innocence' which their images and performances tend to embody. Due to this eroticisation being linked to paedophilia and the commercialisation of childhood—both practices which attack the very heart of the image

of childhood as a sacred and protected space—the child star was identified as being an important figure in understanding the complexity behind the idealisation of childhood which permeates our culture.

Chapter 3 traced the social history of child stars and demonstrated how the lowly child performer turned into the child star over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the dominant theatrical platform evolved from street to stage to screen. The fact that this shift in cultural form coincided with changing social attitudes towards childhood, with children becoming valued for their charms rather than their labour power, meant that the child performer suddenly represented something much more than a curiosity. In contrast to the prodigious adult impersonators of the early Victorian stage, the newly invented child star then became prized for embodying ideal traits of childhood such as naturalness and naivety. The controversy surrounding child performers and later child stars was identified as characteristic of public attitudes towards this group due to stereotypical images of them as being precociously sexual and exploited by adults. Even given changes in social perceptions of young performers as deviant or adorable, the role of such children to enact and fulfil idealised adult representations of childhood was shown to be consistent throughout the ages, thus confirming the significance of the child star as a salient feature of Western culture.

Given the ambiguous status of the child star as both an adored image of the ideal child and a threat to the very concept of childhood as a time of preternatural wisdom and purity, an approach to exploring the construction of child stars in the media was employed which encompassed as much of the complicated and contradictory information about this social group as was possible. For this reason, a 'two-pronged attack' was implemented which allowed me to explore both the powerlessness and the power of the child star.

To this end, in Chapter 4 media texts were deconstructed using the principles of discourse analysis in order to examine how the naturalisation of the image of child stars as overwhelmingly negative and pitiful is achieved, even given their talent, good fortune, and evident success. I found that a pervasive myth that there is a curse on child stars underpinned the tone and content of many stories, and I identified the linguistic and narrative techniques which were used to naturalise and reinforce this idea. Such stereotypical structuring of the lives of child stars as full of disaster was identified as a discursive device used to punish those who transgress the normative boundaries of childhood in our society and to reinforce the collective consensus on the correct way for a child to live and behave. I went on to challenge the pervasive strength of the so-called 'curse' of the child star by presenting exceptions to the rule such as child performers in Victorian times and resolutely middle-class children who are often seen to have the protection of both their education and their parents. The default association of child stars with working-class culture was also identified as a contributing factor to their negative construction in the press.

Having established the constructed nature of the idea that early celebrity leads to adult unhappiness I went on, using the work of Goffman[1] as a guide, to examine how former child stars react to the stigma of being, in the eyes of the world, cursed and forever set apart as odd and 'abnormal' because of their unusual childhoods. By analyzing their interviews and autobiographies I found that certain patterns of response were evident in the ways former child stars justified, rationalised, and explained their lives and experiences, which I identified as attempts to establish their 'authenticity' as adults and re-gain the credibility which they felt had been lost even before they understood the implications of their early success. The way in which former child stars appeared to have internalised normative media constructions of themselves as somehow transgressive and damaged was evident in the techniques they employed to challenge that stigmatisation of their identity. For example, they tended to blame others for their initial entry into show business, and they highlighted the unhappy experiences they had had as a child. However, one cannot help but wonder that if being a former child star were generally considered to be a wonderful, enviable position to be in, the retrospective stories of what it was 'really' like might not be very different in both selective content and tone. The apologetic nature of the former child stars' self-told stories was therefore identified as a technique of protecting their damaged identities due to the strength of the media in characterising them as transgressive and therefore cursed because of the threat they inadvertently posed to the sanctity of childhood when they were children themselves.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I used a broadly structuralist approach to investigate the other side of the child star phenomenon—that of the inherent power of child stars to generate emotion and/or embody hope and futurity. In contrast to the previous chapter, which focussed on the culturally specific socially constructed nature of the child star as a symbol of all that is wrong about contemporary childhood, Chapter 5 explored the child star as a manifestation of the powerful wonder-child archetype. Working with Jung's[2] ideas of the universality of the 'child' motif, I found that certain elements of the representations of child stars throughout the twentieth century can be traced back to the religious iconography of the Christ-child. Furthermore, it became apparent that two of the most enduring and desirable attributes of child stars—those of being 'natural' and being 'small yet big'—were also those attributes which have defined child heroes and saviours in the myths and legends of the world. Having demonstrated the connection of the contemporary child star with the universal motif of the redemptive child, I went on to explore how the power of the child star also derives from its ambiguous status within our system of meaning. Using Leach's[3] theory of cognitive categorisation, I showed how the child star falls between both the categories of childhood and adulthood and the categories of this world and the divine. This 'in between' status sets the child star apart as sacred and accursed, a duality which is again based on the separateness of this group

from the 'normal.' That the categorisation of child stars as abnormal should be the basis both of their power and, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, their powerlessness is a key finding of this research, the implications of which are discussed later in this chapter.

Finally, in Chapter 6, through an analysis of media stories about Charlotte Church over a period of several years, the power of child stars to be symbolic of the tension between innocence and experience which characterises the universal journey into adulthood was illustrated. I showed how Church was perfect to be used as a metaphor for the struggle between good and evil due to her public transformation from angelic schoolgirl to sexy pop star. Church's media journey highlighted and reinforced the cultural significance of the child star to both embody and destroy the sacred image of childhood innocence, and this is another key theme of the research which is expanded upon later in this chapter.

The study incorporated both a social constructivist approach to understanding the way the category 'child star' is presently constructed in our culture and a structuralist reading of the data which allowed for an analysis of some of the universal themes and motifs which inform our representations of the child star. Through this inquiry I have been able to demonstrate how the child star derives meaning from both its cultural specificity as a transgressive child and its mythological origins as a signifier of futurity, wholeness, and hope. The conflation of the qualities of the 'real' child performer with the image of the child performer on screen or stage has been difficult to avoid throughout the study, and it could be argued that the 'wonder-child' archetype is more a feature of the ideal representations of children than of the child stars themselves. However, I think it is this very confusion of the qualities of the real and the ideal which is at the very heart of the meaning of the child star who is from one perspective an embodiment of all that we desire children to be, and yet viewed from a different angle is a deviant child who must be punished or pitied. The unique status of the child star emanates not only from its being the site of multiple meanings but also from the way such children are open to fierce public scrutiny and judgement which would not be permitted in relation to the vast majority of children who enjoy the protection and privacy of childhood.

In reference to the initial questions posed in the introduction then it seems the answers are both straightforward and yet deeply complex. Why do we have child stars? We have them because they represent the divine wonder-child, a symbol of hope and completeness which the human psyche has always had a longing to see manifest in material form. We need them because they are what we can never be again and their 'natural' charm makes us believe in the ultimate goodness of people in their uncorrupted, pre-adult state. Why do we ridicule and denigrate former child stars in the press? Because they grow up and away from the image of perfection and redemption they signified as children. They let us down by becoming just like us: fallible, weak, selfish, and flawed, and we feel cheated by

their ultimate 'normality.' However, our hostility runs deeper than that as child stars in their material rather than symbolic form also challenge the very boundaries of Western childhood which have been so carefully and comprehensively constructed over the last two centuries. As demonstrated through reference to the work of Douglas,[4] the stigmatisation of former child stars as cursed and abnormal freaks is an ancient technique of controlling anomalies in society in order to protect the values and rules of the community. The child star then seems to be caught up in both contemporary politics concerning the homogenisation and definition of childhood and underlying structures of symbolic meaning. It is my contention that it is this position of child stars at the intersection of the social and the universal, which not only provides the answers to the questions of this research but also demonstrates the usefulness of considering childhood more generally as determined by social and structural components. This connection of the phenomenon of the child star with wider issues concerning childhood is explored next.

CHILDHOOD AND THE CHILD STAR

Throughout this book I have indicated the salience of studying the child star in relation to further understanding the complex status of 'childhood' more generally in our society. The following discussion brings together the relevant findings of this research with some of the most prominent issues which currently concern theorists and researchers in the area of childhood studies. I begin by locating the child star within the broader discussion about what the 'child' is.

On closer inspection the duality of meaning of the child star as both a culturally specific construction and a timeless symbol of hope and goodness, as identified in this study, is actually another manifestation of the endless debate about the essential nature of the child. In its simplest terms the question boils down to the issue of whether the child is viewed as 'tabula rasa,' literally a blank sheet who must be socialised and cultured into the ways of his or her community, or is seen as 'speculae naturae,' the mirror of nature who possesses gifts that are lost in the finished product of adulthood. Neustadter[5] connects this dichotomy of notions about childhood to the social by associating 'tabula rasa' with modernist ideas of rationality and progress and 'speculae naturae' with what he terms 'anti-modernist' ideals of natural virtue and innocence. He describes the ongoing tension between the two positions thus:

> These two camps, with sharply conflicting views of childhood, have struggled to impose their definition of children's proper place in society; and have used the image of the child to dramatize and articulate different perspectives on society, progress and social change.[6]

In modernist thought then, as Parsons explains, socialisation mechanisms motivate the child 'to conformity and dissuade him from deviance' from social expectations with the emphasis being on ensuring that the child is adjusted to the 'normal functioning of the social system.'[7] The overriding aim is for children to reproduce adult roles, norms, and responsibilities as they come of age and thus perpetuate the existing social order. Childhood is seen in this way as a period of probation for the adult world. In this light it is clear that child stars go against the grain of modernist conceptions of the functional purpose of childhood because they do not adhere to the conformity of the process of socialisation which has been established to ensure the continuation of the institutions and power relations which define and dominate society. Such individuals have historically been described as being 'counterculture' or belonging to a 'sub-culture,' and public attitudes towards them have been divided politically as well as on the basis of age and social class. For example, the 'hippy' movement in America in the 1950s and 60s was built on the idea that remaining in the innocent and creative natural state of childhood was far preferable to the robotic, unthinking 'raw deal' of becoming an adult. The distinction between 'straight' and 'hip' often divided generations, and one of the slogans of the movement was not to trust anyone over thirty. As Raymond Mungo observed in his memoirs of the counterculture, leaving childhood for adulthood is not an inherently desirable exchange:

> I am never quite free of the forces attempting to make me grow up, sign contracts, get an agent, be a man . . . I have seen what happens to men. It is curious how helpless, pathetic and cowardly is what adults call a Real Man . . . If that is manhood, no thank you.[8]

The anti-modernist view of childhood, however, embraces such ideas of childhood as superior to adulthood due to the unfettered thinking and creative spontaneity possessed by children. As Neustadter explains:

> Anti-modernist theorists urge that society affirm and accept childhood with all its potentialities. The childhood virtues of spontaneity, purity and innocence must be nurtured and celebrated. Children are the centre of hope.[9]

Within this construct, children are seen as 'the bearers of tremendously significant tidings,'[10] and this concept of children as natural wonders is much closer in spirit to the idea of the child star as a powerful symbol of redemption and promise as described in Chapters 5 and 6 of this work.

Neustadter is careful to differentiate the term 'anti-modern' from 'postmodern' when describing the purely theoretical dichotomy between supporters and opponents of the child as a tool of rational progress, and I think he is absolutely right to do so. However, the term 'postmodern' is perhaps more appropriate to describe the current status of childhood as a

cornucopia of different meanings, values, and discourses of which there is no stable referent. As demonstrated in this study, the child can be understood both as a symbol and a lived reality, as a product of the social system or as an ephemeral connection with the divine, as an innocent angel or as a potentially dangerous deviant, as a spectacle to be consumed or as a treasure to be saved. The contradictions and layers of complexity go on and on, and one way to understand this is to refer to postmodern theories of the fragmentation of meaning and the free-floating nature of signifiers in contemporary culture.

For example, as Baudrillard[11] describes it, within postmodern society the evil demon of images and the precession of simulacra have removed the need for reality and with it the moral order of a society. Reality has been replaced with the hyperreal image of reality which finally bears no relation whatever to the 'basic reality,' becoming instead 'its own pure simulacrum.' Baudrillard therefore describes images as 'murderers of the real'[12] and laments the loss of truth and God which such a substance-less existence provides us with.

In relation to children, this moral panic over the rise of the image over reality can be associated with concerns over the commercialisation of both visual representations of the child and of childhood itself. Kline[13] has drawn attention to the way in which children are now globally constructed as a consumer group by multi-national organisations and subject to the processes which universalise human needs as merely a 'fetishism of use-value' thereby degrading childhood to the level of yet another marketing classification. As such the images of the 'child' which proliferate in our media culture have as little to do with 'real' children as the commercially defined category of 'childhood' has to do with the lived experience of being a child. Kline describes the increasing targeting of children by global promotional communication as due to the rise of children's industries, international strategies of marketing, and the deregulation of cultural industries. Protestors who voice fears over the death of childhood as a time of innocence and separateness from the adult world of commerce have to compete with the multi-billion-dollar industry which trades in children's toys and games as well as food and drink manufacturers, who are hell-bent on establishing brand loyalty with a new generation of consumers regardless of the so-called 'sanctity of childhood.'

When we consider that child stars represent the ultimate in the commercialisation of childhood whereby they are actually children who have a market value and who are products to be bought, sold, and consumed according to the dictates of an industry, it becomes a little clearer as to why they can be targets for such vilification in our society at the present time. Not only do they ignore the normative standard that children should be economically inactive dependants rather than workers, but they are also a part of the commercialised world of unbounded entertainment, advertising, and marketing associated with the corruption and decimation of 'childhood'

more generally. Clearly child stars upset the idealised image of childhood by being paid for their services whilst at the same time portraying beings whose goodness places them above the petty adult spheres of money and narcissistic ambition. There is also the discomfiting fact that, despite trust funds and declarations of selflessness, it is inescapable that the parents of child stars make a profit out of the labour of their child—a practice which has become almost completely unacceptable in Western society over the last hundred years.

Zelitzer[14] explored this complex relationship between the human and market values of children in her seminal study on the case of children's insurance in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She describes the emergence of the economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless' child as a product of a growing sacralisation of children's lives over this period which began in middle-class families and gradually trickled down into the labouring classes as children were removed from the world of work and re-located in schools. This establishment of childhood as a non-productive time became associated with a new moral imperative to protect and value children which has persisted in our conception of child labour ever since, whereby the shared consensus is now that 'the concept of making money out of the life or death of a child seems mercenary and morally repugnant to most people.'[15] The practice of insuring children therefore became unsavoury, and Zelitzer quotes Felix Adler as early as 1905, declaring that to make profit out of children was to 'touch profanely a sacred thing.'[16] However, even in those days of emerging enlightenment and social progress, the child star was seen as a separate issue, for some reason never quite being entitled to the sanctified status enjoyed by other children. Zelitzer notes that by the 1920s:

> It was recognised that only in exceptional cases, such as child actors (Shirley Temple, for example, was insured for $600,000 at the age of nine in 1936) did parents lose money when they lost a child.[17]

Exactly why making money from child performers is considered acceptable even today, when for the last century making a profit from children has been viewed with increasing distaste is one of the 'taken for granted' facts of social life which this book has aimed to unravel. I have demonstrated through this research that the way in which child stars are constructed as different from 'normal' children due to their innate 'specialness' and/or 'deviant' childhood experiences sets them apart from the received consensus on how children should be treated and justifies their exclusion from the usual protections and privileges that Western childhood offers. By separating child stars from other children both conceptually and materially (they are educated on set, they receive a wage, and so-on) such individuals become simply images or simulacra of real children and as such are denied full personhood in the social world.

This distancing of certain children from 'normal' children in order to avoid having to treat them as fully human is explored by Giroux[18] in relation to the odd spectacle of child beauty pageants which have been proliferating in America for the last twenty years. He describes the practice of dressing up little girls and parading them on stage in full make-up as emblematic of the phenomenon of the 'disappearing child' whereby the 'real' child is replaced with a fantasy image of the 'child' which, 'allows adults to believe that children do not suffer from their greed, recklessness, perversions of will and spirit, and that they are, in the final analysis, unaccountable.'[19]

The stratagem of imbuing such juvenile beauty queens, as well as child stars, with lashings of adorable 'childhood innocence' also works to feed the fantasy that the child is a repository of all the goodness and potential that the adult world lacks. Ironically though, this innocence can also be interpreted as highly erotic in its mysteriousness, thus perpetuating the sexualisation and commodification of, in this case, young girls who are, in child beauty pageants and similar practices, being taught to identify themselves through the 'pleasures and desires of the adult gaze.' As Goldstein notes:

> Only in a culture that represses the evidence of the senses could child pageantry grow into a $5 billion dollar industry without anyone noticing. Only in a nation of promiscuous puritans could it be a good career move to equip a six-year-old with bedroom eyes.[20]

The separation of issues of child abuse and paedophilia from the cultural practices which encourage such sexualisation of young children is identified by Giroux as a false one, and he views child beauty pageants as upheld by commercial and ideological structures within the broader society such as fashion photography and advertising. Giroux quotes from an article in the *New York Times* which voices the importance of recognising the complicit part we all play in reifying and objectifying children by demanding particular representations of them in the media:

> the strange world of kids' pageantry is not a 'subculture'—it's our culture. But as long as we call it a subculture, it can remain a problem for somebody else.[21]

A similar sentiment could be applied to child stars, who have long been denied access to the protection and privacy afforded other children and whose bodies are treated like a commodity. By placing the blame for any negative experiences or uncomfortable imagery squarely with the child performers themselves or with their 'greedy' parents, the media absolves the consuming public of any guilt in the avidly reported 'downfalls' of former child stars. The hypocrisy of a society which demands idealised visions of childhood and then demonises the 'real' people behind the image can surely only exist in a culture which values children for their future potential and yet does not want them to grow up.

Indeed, worries about the precocious sexuality of children, especially little girls, seems to be part of a more generalised anxiety about the consequences of children growing up too soon in our society. Children who appear in child beauty pageants and those who perform professionally on screen are tangible, visible manifestations of these concerns, and therefore debates around their welfare often centre on such issues even though it is adult desire which has fashioned their images and positioned them in the public gaze. Giroux notes that the fear of children growing up too soon is frequently related to the changing dynamic between children and the media, whereby popular cultural sites

> position children in terms of how they are taught to think of themselves through the images, values and discourses offered to them.[22]

For example, the way young girls learn to perceive themselves through the commercial appropriation of childhood femininity is explored by Russell and Tyler[23] in their critical analysis of a chain of U.K. retail outlets called 'Girl Heaven.' These shops sell cosmetics, accessories, jewellery. and other, what would generally be considered to be high-camp paraphernalia such as feather boas, and also offer popular make-over sessions to groups of little girls who are bedecked with feminine accoutrements and make-up. Russell and Tyler draw attention to the way in which such overtly gendered consumerism instils in young girls the idea that they should be body conscious and that they should analyse their bodies and identify ways in which they deviate from the ideal—facets of womanhood which are specifically aligned with increasing sexual attractiveness and awareness.

Given such concerns that the institutions and practices around childhood both encourage little girls to be reflexive about their appearance and to ape adult femininity, the adult preference for child stars who appear to embody 'natural' qualities of childhood becomes clear—'normal' adults do not want children to be precociously mature or sexualised, nor do they wish to see representations of children as such.

However, it is interesting that the success of stores such as 'Girl Heaven' and the obvious enjoyment many young girls derive from dressing up in adult-style clothes and copying pop stars and celebrities indicate that perhaps children themselves do not prize their own 'naturalness' and 'innocence' over all other attributes. This omission of the child's point of view in the debate over children 'growing up too quickly' can be understood as an example of the disparity between the notion of the child as an object of concern and that of the child as subject of their own self-representation. If we accept that adults always know what is best for children and that children should not, for example, leave childhood before it is deemed age-appropriate for them to do so, then the child becomes simply an object of adult control rather than a subject of his or her own agency. It also begs the question of what it is that we as adults are basing the decisions we make for

and about children on. As demonstrated through the work of Giroux and the present study, some of the dominant elements of contemporary Western childhood are derived from the most whimsical ideas.

Castaneda,[24] in her reflection on the status of the 'child' in poststructuralist theory, explains the failure to establish a satisfactory theory of the child-subject as due to the way in which the 'child' has been established through definitions of what it is not in relation to adulthood, thereby divesting the child of any 'specific materiality.' She explains the problem thus: 'It is difficult at this stage to imagine how a theory of the child-subject might proceed,' because the child is not only inadequately represented in theory, but also because the child is 'everywhere in representation (on Benetton's billboards, on television shows, in the news) but almost nowhere in public self-representation.'[25]

That the figure of the 'child' replaces the child in public life, culture, and social theory is nowhere more evident than in the case of the child star. Indeed, given Kincaid's[26] radical constructivism which suggests that society and culture have constructed the child as something of an 'alien species,' it seems possible that all children are now conceptualised as nothing more or less than child stars. As previously noted, he claims that the child

> is not, in itself, anything but a cultural formation and an object of adult desire, a function necessary to our psychic and cultural life.[27]

The fundamental reason for this theoretical and material neglect of the child as a self-actualised individual has often been identified as the unavoidably unequal power relations between adults and children. For example, Butler describes the disparity as due to the incontrovertible dependence of the infant:

> The primary passion born of total dependence makes the child vulnerable to subordination and exploitation. It lays the ground for the subject's future as on-going subjection to power.[28]

Hockey and James[29] relate the powerlessness of children to other 'monolithic and culturally specific categories' such as 'the disabled' and 'the elderly' which 'work as stereotypes to gloss over and homogenise the wide diversity of social experience which belongs to those assigned membership of such categories.'[30] They explain that it is in the interests of those with power (namely, able-bodied, financially independent adults) to perpetuate such categories in order to justify unequal power relations which are operative within the life course between those who are 'without full personhood and those in possession of it.'[31]

The powerlessness of children to control either their status in society or the symbolic value of their image has been demonstrated in this book in relation to media constructions of child stars and former child stars as

stigmatised and pitiful individuals. That this negative construction is due to wider fears about the 'death' of childhood and children growing up and away from adult control too quickly reflects the way in which the child star has a cultural significance or 'currency' to be used to represent wider concerns. Other studies have also reported this malleability of the image of certain groups of children to firstly be constructed as a group, and then be presented in the media in particular ways in order to reinforce socially held beliefs about childhood and other issues.

For example, Seale[32] analysed media representations of childhood cancer and noted how such children are used as symbols of innocence and victim-hood in contrast to villainous hospital bureaucrats. The stories he analysed emphasised a preferred reading of childhood as a time of innocent enjoy-ment whereby children are entitled to, among other things, toys, presents, love, education, and a promising future, all of which cancer threatens to remove. Interestingly, just as in media constructions of child stars, children with cancer are often represented as 'special' and exceptional. Recurrent themes of the struggle between life and death and good and evil are also evident in these narratives, along with fairy-tale-style characterisations of patients, doctors, social workers, and parents as heroes, fools, villains, or bunglers. Seale notes that the opportunity such stories provide to idealise a certain version of childhood, create drama, and also reinforce high expecta-tions of health care availability mean that the child's 'real' story is largely irrelevant to the journalistic aims of the genre:

> Whether children with cancer live or die, however it seems that they are all special characters, with unusual levels of insight, cheerfulness, courage or altruism. Rarely do children with cancer speak for themselves or express dis-tress at any length. This absence allows generous scope for idealised descrip-tions of child heroism.[33]

This erasure of subjectivity in reports of children has been noted in other areas of the media such as by Burman[34] in charitable aid campaigns and in the social construction of street children by De Moura.[35] Indeed, De Mou-ra's analysis of the discourses surrounding street children in Brazil draws attention to many of the issues which were identified in this study on child stars. For example, he notes that street children are seen to epitomise a wider decline in family values and a breakdown in moral values in society. They are presented as being outside mainstream society and forever stigma-tised because of their failure to have a 'normal' childhood, and their lives and experiences are held up as spectacles to be judged by the worried, or perhaps simply fascinated, public:

> Every aspect of their lives is exposed to the public gaze and appraisal, and their appearance, life conditions and behaviours arouse pity, disgust, horror and disapproval among spectators.[36]

Furthermore, just as child stars are seen as both victims of adult exploitation and evil wrongdoers and transgressors of childhood themselves, so street children are caught in this duality of being constructed as both innocent and deviant:

> Although street children are presented as the victims of poverty and malevolent adults, they also display undesirable behaviour: sexual promiscuity, prostitution, use of drugs and criminal acts. In the name of generalisation and the search for the real, poor families are represented as a breeding ground for moral corruption and street children as lacking any ethical awareness of the civilised world.[37]

The consequences of media constructions of childhood are, it seems, wide and insidious, and it is my intention that the current study will be a contribution to the body of work which aims to draw attention to and challenge dominant narratives which create certain subject positions for children, whoever they are and however privileged or not they are perceived to be, from which it is almost impossible for the individual to escape.

That this research has also highlighted the power of the image and the idea of the child star, however, is an important adjunct to the disempowering constructions of most children who fall outside acceptable social boundaries of 'normal' childhoods. By drawing attention to the deeper mythical and archetypal influences which give meaning to the child star beyond the confines of our temporally and culturally specific boundaries I have indicated the limitations of a purely social constructivist analysis in fully accounting for this, and potentially many other, aspects of childhood.

This book has drawn attention to the fact that child stars are unusual in deriving both power and powerlessness from their status as being different from 'normal' children. This ambiguity, along with the unique relationship child stars have with the media in being both commercialised cultural products and contributors to idealised notions and images of childhood, render them important figures in our ongoing deconstruction of childhood.

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, the complexity of discourses surrounding the child star reflects the complexity of discourses around children in general in contemporary society, particularly in relation to fears about the increasing commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood. Constantly drawing attention to the inconsistent and contradictory messages about children which bombard us every day through the media is one way in which sublime shifts in public attitudes and stereotypical injustices can be identified, and the disparity between media representation and lived experience can be made explicit. Without such awareness of how the media constructs and frames each and every one of us due to our own social and cultural characteristics it is all too easy to fall into the trap of 'common sense' acceptance of the seemingly innocuous normalisations which work to subjectify, contain and ultimately to control.

Overall it is my intention that this book has highlighted the social, cultural, and ideological significance of child stars and that I have shown the potential enrichment that the inclusion of some of childhood's outsiders can contribute to our overall understanding of how childhood works in our society.

THE PARADOX OF THE CHILD STAR

The child star has been demonstrated in this study to be the product of many different meanings, interpretations, and historical antecedents. My attempt to define, describe, and explain this social group has produced an account of child stars which encompasses both their cultural specificity and their universality and which has challenged popular accounts which simply pathologise child stars and their parents.

However, in the final analysis the child star will always remain somewhat elusive and hard to define, and perhaps this is as it should be. Why certain children 'make it' and others don't, what it is about particular individuals that enables them to elicit emotion in an audience, and how some children come to represent the ideals of childhood through their performances are all questions which are difficult, if not impossible, to answer.

As Donald[38] explains, regardless of the analytic techniques used there are inherent limitations in truly understanding what it is about certain individuals, be they six or sixty, whose images have the profound power to fascinate us and hold our attention in the visual media:

> The circulation, reception and cultural currency of stars cannot be explained convincingly by exclusively textual, sociological or economic forms of analysis . . . stars have a currency which runs beyond the institution of cinema. They require an analysis capable of explaining the resilience of these images which we pay to have haunt our minds.[39]

Moreover, the resilience of the child star to be an enduring figure in a society which has supposedly moved on from reductionist ideas of children as objects of adult manipulation is the biggest mystery of all. The cultural significance of the child star surely resides in this paradox.

Notes

PREFACE

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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 3

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WEBSITES

The following sites are useful sources of information on child stars and former child stars.

www.childstarlets.com
www.child-stars.com
www.cinema.com
www.harrypotter.warnerbros.co.uk
www.justcharlotte.co.uk
www.minorcon.org (advocacy and support group for child stars and former child stars)
www.silentsaregolden.com
www.silentera.com
www.weht.net (Whatever happened to?)

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