SELLING OUT CHILDHOOD

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TODAY WE LIVE WITH A DEEP UNEASE. IF WE LOOK closely at the images of children in advertising, photography, and other forms of popular culture, we see that the soul of the child is under siege. There has been a hollowing out of the dignity and moral agency of the child. As the boundaries that separate adulthood and childhood have eroded, children have become subjected to the same forces that have caused the soul to recede from our moral landscape.

The ideals of childhood shape not only our treatment of children, but our inner lives and sensibilities as adults. Central to these ideals is the notion that childhood is a special province of life, a time reserved for play, education, the exploration of nature, the exercise of the imagination, and moral and civic development. To the degree that consumer society transforms and undermines these ideals, the formative project of shaping our communal and civic lives is eroded. Marketing to children commodifies and undermines the ideals of childhood. Children are used to sell products and are treated as products, as objects to manipulate. The selling out of childhood is related to a deeper cultural problem—the selling of the self.

Before examining the representations of children in advertising, photography, and fiction, let me begin with a story that shows how larger cultural changes are played out in our everyday lives.

Pay to Play

Not long ago a brightly colored invitation came in the mail for my twelve-year-old son.[1] "You're invited to a paintball birthday party." I had only a vague idea what "paintball" was about. It conjured up images of squirting finger paint or throwing mud pies. A few days before the party, the father of the birthday boy gave us a call: "You'll be receiving a contract in the mail. It's no big deal, just something the lawyers make them do." I didn't give it a thought until I pulled the contract out of the envelope: "This is a Release of Liability—Read Before Signing." A couple of clauses stood out:

> Clause 1: "The risk of injury from the activity and weaponry in paintball is significant, including the potential for permanent disability and death."
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> Clause 4: "I, for myself and on behalf of my heirs, assigns, personal representatives and next of kin, HEREBY RELEASE AND HOLD HARMLESS THE AMERICAN PAINTBALL LEAGUE (APL), BOSTON PAINTBALL, the owners and lessors of premises, etc."

"Welcome to today's birthday party. And, by the way, in case your kid is killed at the party, it's not our fault." As a self-respecting, old-fashioned mother, I just couldn't sign. Apparently all the other parents did; my son heard at school that everyone had a great time.

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[1] In this section, I draw in part from Kiku Adatto, "Trigger Happy Birthday," *The New York Times Magazine* (14 May 2000): 96.

I decided to make the journey downtown to Boston Paintball to see what it was all about. I drove past the remnants of the old Boston Garden, past torn-up billboards, through desolate streets, under the elevated trolley tracks, and into the paintball parking lot. I walked into an old warehouse and rode up a rickety freight elevator.

On the sixth floor, the door opened onto a 17,000 square foot facility with two large fields with bunkers, barrels, forts, and towers, and a room to load guns. The place was swarming with twelve-year-old suburban boys, with two birthday parties in progress. Helped by their parents, the kids put on the safety gear—chest protectors, neck guards, and Star Wars-style masks. I soon learned there was a reason for this. The paintball guns look like real semi-automatic weapons and shoot the paintball bullets at 100 miles an hour. As one of the referees told the boys during the "safety orientation": "First rule: Don't take off the masks. Lift a mask, you'll lose an eye. Second rule: On the field, no shooting point-blank. No taking hostages. No using dead guys as shields."

The kids played game after game with names like "Elimination" and "Rambo," and periodically ran off the field to tell their parents: "It was awesome. I killed someone." Amid the bursts of gunfire, I looked out on the paintball field. The dim lighting, the bunkers, and metal structures looked like a target range or a playground in a bad neighborhood just before dark. I was struck by the fact that children's birthday parties are in some of the most run-down and forsaken parts of town, or in the suburban strip malls that house Chuck-E-Cheese, McDonald's, The Discovery Zone, and numerous video arcades—all sites of pay-to-play birthday parties. And the price for these birthday parties is not cheap. A paintball party for ten boys with pizza runs around $450.

The commercialism and violence of paintball is troubling. There is also an irony in it. One hundred years ago reformers tried to renew the city for the sake of the child. The Progressives were called the "child savers" because central to their mission was bringing green into the city, building parks and playgrounds to combat unhealthy tenements and urban blight. In the 1950s, the middle classes fled the cities for the green lawns of suburbia. But green is no longer in. Parents drive long

distances and pay big bills to take their kids to urban zones and commercial areas, often as forsaken as the site of Boston Paintball.

Child Labor: Commodification in Perspective

The Progressive era gives us a perspective on the present in several ways. Progressive reformers worried about consumerism and the emerging mass media, but they had to focus their attention on an even more grievous and historically familiar form of "selling out childhood"—child labor. A century ago, children in the United States worked long hours in mines, mills, factories, fields, and city sweatshops. For many, by the age of nine or ten their childhood was over, if not radically curtailed. They had to sell their labor for poor wages, poor working conditions, and little hope of advancement from menial tasks. Lewis Hine, one of the great investigative photographers of the Progressive era, captured both the oppressiveness of the working conditions and the human dignity of the children. Among his powerful images were a series of pictures of young children in the mills and the mines. In his photograph titled, "Sadie, a cotton mill spinner, Lancaster, South Carolina, 1908," Hine's critique of child labor is heightened by his focus on the innocent child against the mass of factory machinery. Sadie is not simply an abstract victim; she is presented to us as an individual, a subject in her own right.

Equally powerful is Hine's series of pictures of the breaker boys—children as young as nine years old who had to spend nine, ten, even twelve-hour days in back-breaking labor in the breakers above the mines, sorting rocks and debris from the coal. The boys had to sit on wooden benches placed over the coal chutes. Leaning over the chutes, they suffered chronic coughs from breathing in the coal dust. There was also the constant risk of falling into the chute and being mangled or killed. When the boys reached the age of twelve, they were sent deep into the mines. One of Hine's most poignant pictures is of "door boy," sitting on a bench by a heavy door for nine or ten hours alone, waiting to open and close the door for the coal cars. The chalk graffiti on the wall, "Please don't scare the birds," expresses the innocence of childhood, even in the midst of exploitation.

During the Progressive era, children joined unions and formed unions of their own.[2] They were not simply victims, but agents, actors for social change. The Children of America in Mines and Factories and Workshops Assembled declared:

> Whereas, We, Children of America, are declared to have been born free and equal, and Whereas, We are yet in bondage in this land of the free...therefore be it Resolved, that childhood is endowed with certain inherent and inalienable rights, among which are freedom from toil for daily bread, the right to play and to dream; the right to the normal sleep of the night season; the right to an education, and that we may have equality of opportunity for developing all that there is in us of mind and heart.[3]

These words sound like they were drawn from the *Declaration of Independence*, which of course they were, but the children's document was called "The Declaration of Dependence." What they were asserting was at that time still a radical demand—the right to a protected childhood.

The ideals of childhood that animated Progressive reforms had been centuries in the making. In fact the modern ideals of childhood arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth century as part of an argument with

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[2] As one observer noted, "The children have their unions as well as the grown folk. Almost as soon as the breaker boy's certificate is accepted...he makes application to become a member of the 'Junior Local,' the members of which are all boys under sixteen. Their weekly meetings take place at night, and are conducted with the utmost secrecy, the members being admitted only by password." And "the fact that boys constituted 20 percent of the membership of the United Mine Workers of America was a sore point with the President's Commission investigating the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902. The commission felt it was 'unwise and impolitic to permit boys of immature age and judgment to participate in deciding the policy...of a labor union,' especially since the boy delegates held the balance of power in union meetings." Cited in Robert H. Bremmer, ed., *Children and Youth in America: A Documentary History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) 630.

[3] The "Declaration of Dependence by the Children of American Mines and Factories and Workshops Assembled" is cited before the preface of Walter I. Trattner's *Crusade for the Children* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970).

civilization, a critique of the city, and an outrage over the human toll of industrialization and commodification. The child was one of the most visible victims of the city, of the factory, and of the instrumental values of commerce. But, far from viewing the child as simply a victim, the new ideals of childhood were most powerful when they were linked to soulcraft, the formative project of renewing and reforming society.

By the late eighteenth century, the Calvinist view of the sinful child was giving way to enlightenment and romantic ideals. Childhood was considered a special province of life, protected from the adult world. Children had become the subjects of portrait-painting, educational reform, and a growing body of advice books. Rousseau and Wordsworth celebrated the child as the soul of humanity, as our most authentic, natural, and spontaneous self against the corruption of civilization. William Blake, in his "Songs of Innocence and Experience," powerfully captured the expansive soul of childhood even as he expressed outrage at the callousness of city life and the abandonment and exploitation of children.

Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, like the Romantics, viewed childhood as the Eden of the soul, the time when we are closest to nature and to God. Then, as now, childhood was not just for children. It represented a special phase of life, but also the fullest expression of the inner life as opposed to the outward show of social conventions. Just as Wordsworth had declared that "the child is the father of man," so Emerson, in his essay, "Nature," wrote, "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even onto the era of manhood."[4] Horace Mann, leader of the common school movement, believed that the school "would kindle a spirit of amity and mutual respect that the conflicts of adult life could never destroy."[5]

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[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1950) 6.

[5] Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience 1783–1876* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) 138.

This dual aspect of childhood—as a wellspring of the soul shaping adult life and as a special and sheltered period of life reserved for children—has shaped the powerful role of the child in American culture since the nineteenth century.

Fashion's Child

A significant challenge to childhood ideals comes from the sphere of advertising. During the Progressive era the images of children were used in advertising, but the child was still portrayed as a child. The innocence of the child was preserved even as it was used to market products. Marketing childhood innocence continues today in the sophisticated advertising campaigns for products such as Baby Gap clothing or Michelin tires.

What has changed in the last 25 years is not selling innocence but the selling out of innocence. The tale of how advertising has transfigured childhood is illustrated in the images generated by Calvin Klein. In his 1995 advertising campaign for Obsession cologne, Klein's model, Kate Moss, a child-like woman, poses naked from the waist up looking at the camera. But there is nothing child-like in her look, no innocence in her provocative stare.[6] Her dead-on look at the camera says, "You can have me." There is a troubling quality to her objectification. It is as if two transparencies are placed over each other, each representing an opposing belief. The first layer is innocence. The overlay is eroticism. Together, they form the dissonance that sells. The message is, "If you like little girls, you'll love our cologne."

By the mid-'90s, Calvin Klein was posing even younger models in settings that suggested illicit and pornographic sex. His jeans ads, which featured nonprofessional models, appeared not only in magazines and on television, but on New York City buses and provoked an uproar

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[6] In this and the next section, I draw in part from Kiku Adatto, "Childhood: The Last Outpost of the Soul," *See: A Journal of Visual Culture* 1.4 (1995): 34–39.

among parents and child welfare advocates. Stung by the criticisms, Calvin Klein ceased running the campaign and issued an apology in newspapers across the country saying that the public had completely misunderstood the meaning of his images. He claimed his ads were meant to celebrate the "spirit, independence, and inner worth of today's young people."[7]

In recognition of "the role the fashion industry plays in the shaping of culture," Calvin Klein "reformed" his ways.[8] He stopped using young teenage models and began a new ad campaign, "heroin chic," posing young models (but not so young as to get him into legal trouble) to look like drug addicts and street people. By the time he posed preschool kids in their underwear at the end of the decade, it was hard to see it as an innocent frolic.

Other companies, following the lead of Calvin Klein, have transformed their marketing strategies by using sexual images of young people to sell to children. Abercrombie and Fitch re-branded itself from a company selling conservative clothing to a cutting-edge clothing store selling to the youth market of eleven- to twenty-year-olds through ads featuring naked or half-naked teenage boys and girls. A recent Christmas catalogue featured a naked girl on an elephant and naked boys holding up jeans.

The commingling of innocence and sexuality in the ads of Abercrombie and Fitch, Calvin Klein, and other brands illustrates two trends in fashion photography. The first is the hard-edged eroticism pioneered by the European fashion photographer, Helmut Newton, who posed his high fashion models in settings that suggested illicit sex, violence, and sadomasochism. "I like and look for reactions," Newton told an interviewer. "I don't like kindness or gentleness. I want to provoke."[9]

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7 "Statement from Calvin Klein, Inc." (full-page advertisement), *The New York Times* (28 August 1995): A5.

8 "Statement from Calvin Klein, Inc.," A5.

9 Helmut Newton, *Helmut Newton* (New York: Pantheon, 1987) no pagination.

The second trend is the emphasis on the child-woman as supermodel. The "youthquake," as *Vogue* fashion editor Diana Vreeland called it, was marked by the enormous success in the late 1960s of the teenage model Twiggy, whose thin body evoked a little girl and whose wide-eyed face graced the cover of national magazines from *Vogue* to *Newsweek*. A more explicit coupling of childhood and adult sexuality is evident in the early career and meteoric rise of child model Brooke Shields, who began as the Ivory Snow baby in the 1960s and later went on to pose as a teenager in tight-fitting jeans for a series of Calvin Klein television ads, in which she says in a confiding tone, "You know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing."

The most recent trend in fashion magazines is to publish spin-offs of the parent magazine such as *Teen Vogue* or *Ellegirl* aimed directly at young girls. As American ads reach out to the global market, they present images of children and young people saturated in sexuality. They also present an image of selfhood without substance, endlessly mutable, forever being re-fashioned and reconstructed. The inaugural issue of *Ellegirl*, published in the fall of 2001, is a case in point:

> So what is an *Ellegirl* about? Helping you discover your own personal style. Look at our global *Ellegirl*.... Experiment! That's what our advice columnist, Jennifer Brandt, does. Every time I see her she's assumed a different persona...Marilyn Monroe, tough-girl Joan Jett, classic Molly Ringwald...fashion is not about conformity, but about individuality.[10]

We sophisticates of the consumer culture might say, "Well isn't that what fashion and advertising have always been about?" But historically, most American advertising showed children in scenes evoking family or community life. It did not promote sexuality and the mutability of identity as fashion statements. Childhood ideals were left in tact as were the ideals of family life. Now there is no principle or religious

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[10] Brandon Holley, "Welcome to Ellegirl," *Ellegirl* (Fall 2001): 26.

precept that cannot be transformed into an advertising logo. A recent issue of *Teen Vogue*, for example, features an ad with a girl with a bare midriff and provocative jeans and the words "Love Thy Neighbor" as a running title.

The Postmodern Child

By the 1990s, the merging of childhood innocence and adult sexuality had extended beyond the borders of commerce to the realm of art photography. In the work of Sally Mann, fashion's face is recreated in the most intimate sphere, her own immediate family.

In Mann's photograph, "Jessie at 5," the pose is familiar, but it is not the stance of a child. It is the Obsession ad with the overlay of innocence and eroticism reversed. Here, the subject is a real child, the photographer's own daughter. Naked from the waste up, dressed in beads and earrings, she has assumed the provocative pose of a fashion model, her eyes projecting the cultivated vacancy of commercial art. This image is far from the world of childhood make-believe, far from the whimsy of putting on mom's high-heel shoes and hat. Instead, it represents the crossing of a boundary, the erasure of innocence, the subsuming of childhood within an erotic framework.

Mann's 1992 book, *Immediate Family*, turns our expectations of the intimate sphere inside out. In many of Mann's images, childhood is not a haven or shelter, but a simulacra of adult life. The languid look that Mann elicits from her daughter Jessie in photographs like "Candy Cigarette" or "The New Mothers" is a pure act of cultural imitation. We have seen that face, that dangled cigarette in countless incarnations in the movies—in the femmes fatales played by Barbara Stanwyck, Lauren Bacall, and Sharon Stone; in scenes from *The Big Sleep*, *Double Indemnity*, *Body Heat*, and *Fatal Attraction*; in the performances of Madonna; in the acts of female impersonators; in countless MTV videos; and, with a postmodern twist, in Cindy Sherman's impersonations of movie actresses in her self-portrait series, *Untitled Film Stills*. There is enormous cultural capital in the pose, and Mann's images draw their potency and appeal from it.

There is another way in which Sally Mann reflects the postmodernist sensibility—her simulated portrayals of childhood victimization. Like the "heroin chic" ads of Calvin Klein, there is nothing ennobling or redeeming in Mann's portrayals of child abuse, incest, drowning, and death. Mann's simulations of victimization are not a call to reform the world. They fail to elicit the sympathy, compassion, or even outrage we would feel if the children were real victims instead of her own children, carefully posed. One need only contrast her photos with Lewis Hine's portraits of working children or the work of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and other documentary photographers of the Depression. Their photographs of children—in sweatshops and shacks, dust bowls and breadlines, on the streets and at play—do not flinch from the harsh realities of poverty and exploitation. But the children are not defined by their social circumstances. They transcend their victimhood because their selfhood is ennobled. They are bearers of larger meanings and ideals, and the photographs argue that the world should be reformed for their sake.

Postmodernism presents a challenge to the ideals of childhood because it holds up to question all ideals and meanings. It is not concerned with the soul of childhood because it has abandoned the soul of the subject altogether. One of the main missions of art photography since World War II has been to explore identity as a social construction, in which the camera plays a vital role in shaping as well as recording. Since the 1950s, photographers have depicted a social landscape in which the relationship between self and society is askew. The individual is shown exposed, decentered, fragmented, and deformed.

In the dissonant social landscapes of Robert Frank's book, *The Americans*, childhood has no special status. Not once is a child caught smiling or even in the act of play. On the rare occasions when an adult looks lovingly at a child, the child does not look back. Bereft of a world of their own, children assume the worn and weary eyes of their parents. These themes are reiterated in William Klein's depiction of New York in the 1950s. A young boy points his toy gun at the lens of Klein's camera, while his face assumes the contorted expression of a thug. In a photograph titled "Dance," Klein intentionally blurs the faces and gestures

of a young boy and girl who pose for the camera, rendering them into parodies of deformity.

In Diane Arbus' photographs, the loss of childhood exceptionalism and the blurring of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are carried even further. Children and adults alike are portrayed as "freaks." Arbus actively sought out self-styled freaks, circus performers, or people who were physically deformed. But she also specialized in portraits that accentuated the deformities and abnormalities in the commonplace. Arbus took the mundane subjects of family snapshots and photo albums—babies, children at play, family groupings—and transformed them into bizarre caricatures. In the universe Arbus creates, no one is innocent and no one escapes the indignity of the pose.

The child, like the adult, is not shown as a subject in his or her own right in postmodern photography. As if to make this point as a visual metaphor, Joel Cohen photographed a girl jumping rope, but cuts off her head with the photographer's frame. Garry Winogrand rarely asked his subjects to pose for the camera. Instead, the children in his photographs are depicted as lonely figures in a stark and uncertain world. In a photograph taken in Albuquerque, New Mexico, an unattended child is pictured standing at the threshold of the family garage, a small illuminated figure framed by the dark opening. The child's isolation is reiterated by the isolation of the house, which is poised at the edge of suburbia. Instead of the promise of green space, safety, and community, the suburb represents what social critic James Howard Kunstler calls "the geography of nowhere."

The same theme of isolation and abandonment is portrayed by Lee Friedlander in a series of photographs of television sets turned on in empty rooms. In one photograph, a baby's face fills a television screen. The television that frames the child is framed in turn by two darkened doorways. The blurred image of the child is an indecipherable presence. Who is this child? Where is the child? We, the viewers, do not know. The child has become a specter, a photocopy of itself.

The shift in the representations of childhood in fashion photography and art photography finds a striking parallel in fiction. Consider the

children of nineteenth-century fiction. They are often orphans or outcasts, but they are not portrayed as victims in the modern sense. Huckleberry Finn is a case in point. He is an abused kid from a dysfunctional family. His mom is dead. His dad is a perpetual drunk who beats his son and leaves him to fend for himself. It is an all-too-familiar tale, a common subject of today's talk shows and tabloids. But in Mark Twain's tale, Huck is not a victim. He is an American hero.

Huck is an agent of his own destiny imbued with independence, inventiveness, and vitality. He speaks from the soul and does not parrot society's judgments. "People would call me a low down abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum," Huck tells Jim, "but that don't make no difference, I ain't agoing to tell."[11] American writers from Mark Twain to Harriet Beecher Stowe to Horatio Alger celebrated childhood, and in so doing, created enduring stories that have shaped our collective imaginations to this day.

The fact that the child became a central figure in the human drama in the nineteenth century was a revolutionary transformation in human consciousness, a radical departure from the epic and Biblical heroes of the past, where the great souls are patriarchs, prophets, warriors, and kings. It is intriguing that the most helpless and dependent period of life—childhood—is associated with the most robust state of the soul, the purest state of moral consciousness, the most natural and creative stage of human life. Dostoyevsky declared "the soul is healed by being with children."[12] In *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, and other novels of Dickens, the child stands as an emblem of goodness and virtue against society's corruptions, injustices, and vanities.

The presence of children in nineteenth-century novels is important not only when they are activists and agents. Their presence, even when weak or victimized, is a vital form of witnessing. We, as readers, see the

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[11] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885; New York: Airmont, 1962) 55.

[12] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (1874; New York: The Modern Library, 1935) 62.

world from their point of view, and the authors ask us to reform the world for their sake.

The child is also celebrated for creating a world of his own, a world shaped by imagination and play. The enduring popularity of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* is a testament to the spirit of free play they represent. Play becomes a way of exerting mastery over the world. It is a special realm of freedom in which improvisation and cooperation are prized.

A classic example is the story of Tom Sawyer white-washing Aunt Polly's fence. Stuck with a long stretch of fence on a beautiful summer day, Tom pretends that white-washing is not only great fun, but a task so challenging that only the best and brightest need apply. Soon a slew of neighborhood boys, who would have teased Tom for having to work, are trading some of their best stuff—an apple, a kite, a dead rat on a string, marbles, four pieces of orange peel, a key that wouldn't unlock anything—for the privilege of painting the fence. Twain comments wryly that if Tom had been "a great and wise philosopher," he would have comprehended "that Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not *obliged* to do."[13]

The children in contemporary fiction, by contrast, are often wearied by existence, unable to strike out on their own. Unlike Huck Finn, the young protagonist of Mona Simpson's best-selling novel, *Anywhere But Here*, cannot stand up to the lies of her mother or free herself from her mother's oppressive grip: "I wanted to get away from her. There was nowhere I could go. I was twelve. She'd have me six more years."[14] Huck Finn escapes from his drunken father and finds freedom on the river; Ann, by contrast, is trapped. She lives within the frail fantasy world her mother constructs, pinning her hopes on becoming a child television star in California. When Ann finally makes it as a television star, she feels lost, not free:

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[13] Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876; New York: Bantam, 1981) 16.

[14] Mona Simpson, *Anywhere But Here* (New York: Vintage, 1986) 28.

> It wasn't anything like I thought it would be, television. I just had to stand around and say lines.... The pictures we shot were in the Valley, just gray lots and studios, trailer dressing rooms. We stood around waiting most of the time. Nobody thought we were anywhere.[15]

The Selling of the Self

The selling out of childhood ideals is the final stage in the selling of the self, a trend that cultural critics have worried about for a long time. It found classic expression after the Second World War in books like *The Organization Man*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *The Lonely Crowd*, and, above all, in Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*.[16] *Death of a Salesman* remains one of the most widely read and produced plays in America. But does anyone remember what Willy Loman sold? It is not surprising if we don't, because Arthur Miller never mentions it. The point of the play is that Willy Loman is selling himself: "Willy was a salesman.... He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake."[17]

When Willy can no longer sell, he is emptied of selfhood. For a time the worry about the selling of the self remained a worry about the lives of men. Childhood remained the last outpost of the soul. But slowly, imperceptibly, even this last boundary has been transgressed. Childhood itself has become a preparation for the selling of the self. This is because parents, anxious for their children's success, see their children as products to perfect and encourage their children to configure their lives as "living resumés."

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[15] Simpson 440.

[16] William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955); David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale, 1961); and Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949; New York: Penguin, 1982).

[17] Miller 138.

The process of resumé-building actually starts before conception with the marketing of eggs and sperm from Ivy-League donors. It continues as parents compete to get their children into prestigious pre-schools, private schools, or selective public schools, and continues as their children compete for high school and college admissions. The pressure to market children for educational success has opened up a whole new set of markets that sell goods and services to nervous parents and their aspiring children—books, computer programs, prep courses, academic tutors, college admissions consultants, and private athletic coaches.

No one in today's hyperactive education market is "riding on a smile and a shoeshine." Today the selling of the self is based on acquiring real skills and accomplishing real work in the world. It is about substance, not dreams. But the problem is that substance is seen as something to sell. *Selling* substance may be an oxymoron, but it is the essence of skillful resumé building. The problem with selling substance is that it transforms the parent-child bond into an instrumental relationship. It is as if life itself is an ongoing sales campaign, in which the child is seen by the parent (and comes to see himself or herself) as the ultimate product.

We have moved from the era of the "organization man" to the "organization child." This leads to a diminishing of the family sphere and the richness of private life that exists beyond and apart from the public record. For purposes of resumé building, a child doesn't get "credit" for helping in his own home, but he does for volunteering in a nursing home. He doesn't get credit for cooking for his grandmother, but he does for caring for someone else's grandmother in a volunteer program. That's why in our times children do little for their own families, but rack up hours helping other people's families.

The profoundest toll of this practice of instrumentalizing individual relationships is on the bonds of unconditional love and trust between parent and child. These bonds are undermined in two respects. To the degree that children are taught to see themselves as living resumés, they begin to see all relationships in market terms. And to the degree that parents treat children as products to perfect, they are treating their own children as objects, rather than subjects in their own right.

The Enduring Power of Childhood Ideals

I have explored various ways in which the ideals of childhood have been eroded in America's consumer culture. Free play has given way to commercialized pay-to-play games like paintball. The trends in fashion photography, art photography, and fiction in post-war America reveal that children are no longer exempt from the eroticism of adult life, the fragmentation of selfhood, or the culture of victimization that pervades American life. Children are pressured to construct their lives as living resumés.

The only real antidote to the commodification of childhood is the reinvigoration of American family and civic life. The ideals of childhood are not sentimental relics from the past that need to be abandoned for the spiritual flatlands of the commercial culture. History teaches us that childhood ideals are most powerful when they are connected to a call to conscience, civic engagement, and an ongoing critique of the way American society treats its citizens.