

DISTURBING VISIONS OF CHILDHOOD: RENÉ SCHÉRER'S WRITING IN THE 1970S

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In the 1970s, the French philosopher René Schérer (1922–) published a series of texts attacking what he saw as the dominant cultural image of childhood in France at the time. His first publication in this body of work was the polemical *Émile perversi, ou Des rapports entre l'éducation et la sexualité* (1974), which argues that ostensibly progressive modern approaches to education and childrearing perpetuate a regime of surveillance and control set out in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (1762), a foundational text for Western pedagogy. Central to his intervention is Schérer's critique of the regulation of children's desire. He sees this as suppressing their innate creativity and preparing them for heterosexual monogamy at the cost of more diverse social and sexual relationships. Schérer developed his analysis of childhood through two co-authored works in 1976: *Co-ire*, with the writer Guy Hocquenghem, and *Le Corps interdit* with the sociologist and philosopher Georges Lapassade; and through two further solo publications: *Une érotique puérile* and *L'Emprise. Des enfants entre nous* in 1978 and 1979 respectively.¹

Schérer experiments with different approaches across these texts, but they all seek to demonstrate how a historical conception of childhood, propagated by a specific set of discourses and institutional and legislative frameworks, limits the experiences open to children, both with adults and amongst themselves. For Schérer, childhood is an idea or system, rather than a natural category of human existence. His stress on the social construction of childhood demonstrates the influence of the historian Philippe Ariès (1914–1984). In *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960), Ariès argues that the modern conception of childhood and what he terms 'le sentiment de la famille' emerged gradually from the early modern period onwards.² This core thesis, as well as Ariès's critique of

1. René Schérer, *Émile perversi, ou Des rapports entre l'éducation et la sexualité* [1974] (Paris: Désordres/Laurence Viallet, 2006); René Schérer and Guy Hocquenghem, *Co-ire: album systématique de l'enfance (Recherches, 22, 1976)*; Georges Lapassade and René Schérer, *Le Corps interdit: essais sur l'éducation négative* (Paris: Les Éditions ESF, 1976); René Schérer, *Une érotique puérile* (Paris: Galilée, 1978); René Schérer, *L'Emprise: des enfants entre nous* (Paris: Hachette, 1979).
2. Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Plon, 1960), pp. ii–iii. For critical evaluations of Ariès's arguments see Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Harlow and New York: Pearson Longman,

increasing divisions between the generations and his stress on the restriction of children's lives to domestic and educational spaces in modern society, can be detected throughout Schérer's writing on childhood.

Schérer's critique is thus underpinned by the idea that childhood is open to radical reconfiguration, as are relations between adults and children. He offers an uncompromising vision of children's freedom, controversial for its insistence on children's resilience – rather than their constitutive vulnerability – and its arguments as to the emancipatory potential of child sexual experience. Unsurprisingly, this aspect of Schérer's thought – his association with a paedophilic current in French theory in the 1970s – has dominated critical discussions of his work.³ This article analyses and rejects Schérer's defence of paedophilia as articulated in his writing on childhood. It argues, however, that these works merit revisiting in spite of the philosopher's problematic ideas about the emancipatory potential of intergenerational desire. In particular, the article contends that Schérer's work – in its very ethical limitations and troubling effects – poses important questions about the legibility of childhood and adulthood, reveals the entrapment of adults and children within what the philosopher terms 'une disciplinarisation réciproque' and demonstrates how the policing of childhood – and especially childhood sexuality – shores up adult self-awareness.⁴ A discussion of Schérer's approach to the question of representation – his search for ways of representing childhood that would be affirmative without being normative – argues that the controversy of Schérer's defence of paedophilia has obscured a number of other ethical questions raised by his work. The article demonstrates continuities between Schérer's writing on childhood and recent critical interrogations of the interrelation of age and sexuality by scholars adopting queer theoretical perspectives. Schérer's singular contribution to this lineage has been obscured, in part because of his controversial views on child sexuality, but also because of the greater prominence of his sometime colleagues Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. These thinkers are often cited in the aforementioned theoretical context: Foucault for his theorization of the relationship between sexuality, power and knowledge, and Deleuze and Guattari for their conception of radical modes of becoming – particularly what they term a *devenir-enfant* – that would elide the normative social patterning of childhood. The article foregrounds the originality

2005), pp. 7–13 and Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood* (Cambridge and Medford: Polity, 2018), pp. 11–24.

3. See in particular Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), pp. 204–18; Pierre Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit: comment la pédophilie est devenue scandaleuse* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013), pp. 25–101; Anne-Claude Ambroise-Rendu, *Histoire de la pédophilie, XIXe-XXIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), pp. 163–96.
4. Schérer, *Une érotique puérile*, p. 11.

and influence of Schérer's contribution to critical analyses of childhood and makes a case, more broadly, for his distinctive contribution to French theory in the 1970s.

A contextualization of Schérer's writing on childhood

Schérer's early publications in the 1960s focus on three main areas: phenomenology – especially the work of Edmund Husserl –, theories of communication, and the French utopian socialist thinker Charles Fourier (1772–1837).⁵ In an overview of Schérer's intellectual trajectory, Maxime Foerster identifies, across these early preoccupations, a recurrent valorization of uninhibited sensuality and sexual desire in human encounters; this emphasis remains constant across the areas that the philosopher interrogates in the subsequent decades: communication, utopia, hospitality and especially childhood.⁶

Schérer's interest in Fourier, who was read with renewed interest in France in the 1960s, sets up a number of important aspects of his subsequent writing on childhood. Fourier adopted what he termed an 'écart absolu' – a form of radical refusal – in relation to early nineteenth-century French society.⁷ He proposed instead a utopian vision of collective life in the ideal community of the 'phalanstery'. Of particular relevance to Schérer's subsequent thinking was Fourier's hatred of the monogamous family unit and the bourgeois ideals that underpinned it; his celebration of the passions as a unifying force for a new social harmony; and an idiosyncratic vision of work and education predicated on personal inclination.⁸ In 1967, Simone Debout-Oleskiewicz published an unfinished work by Fourier entitled *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* from notebooks that had been suppressed by Fourier's nineteenth-century followers due to their celebration of unfettered sexuality.⁹ Fourier's text found a receptive audience

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5. René Schérer, *Edmund Husserl, sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris: PUF, 1964); idem, *Structure et fondement de la communication humaine* (Paris: SEDES, 1965); idem, *La Phénoménologie des recherches logiques de Husserl* (Paris: PUF, 1967); Charles Fourier, *L'Attraction passionnée* (Paris: Pauvert, 1967).
 6. Maxime Foerster, *Penser le désir: à propos de René Schérer* (Beziers: H&O Éditions, 2007), pp. 13–14.
 7. For Fourier's description of the methods of *doute absolu* and *écart absolu* see Charles Fourier, *Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales* (Leipzig: Pelzin, 1808), pp. 5–8.
 8. Schérer's introduction to his edited volume of Fourier's writing on education and childhood summarizes the ways in which Fourier informs his critique of pedagogy and the place of children within society: Charles Fourier, *Vers une enfance majeure* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2006).
 9. Charles Fourier, *Œuvres complètes, Tome 7, Le Nouveau monde amoureux* (Paris: Pauvert, 1967). The publication history is discussed by Jonathan Beecher in *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 297–98.

amongst those wishing to rethink the role of sexuality and desire in French society in the revolutionary period around May '68. Schérer played a key role in the dissemination of Fourier's ideas, not only through studies and editions devoted to the utopian writer, but also through his analyses of childhood, which adopt Fourierist vocabularies and an uncompromising stance, or *écart absolu*, in relation to mainstream conceptions of childhood in the period in which Schérer was writing.

What were these mainstream conceptions of childhood that Schérer set out to criticize? In his works, Schérer attacks a developmental paradigm that he sees determining children's lives in post-war France, one shaped by a convergence of expertise in pedagogy, child rearing, child psychology and psychoanalysis. *Émile perverti* opens by acknowledging a proliferation of discourse about children in these fields, especially regarding schooling and sexual development (p. 15). It is important to note, then, that Schérer's critique is primarily aimed at liberalising currents rather than conservative institutions and attitudes.

The late 1960s in France saw what historian of psychology Annick Ohayon has described as 'l'explosion tumultueuse, désordonnée et pour beaucoup inquiétante du « peuple psy », dans tous les domaines du corps social'.¹⁰ A central figure in the dissemination of developmental expertise to a broad audience was child psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto (1908–1988). Ohayon talks of a 'Doltoïisation' of French society from the late 1960s onwards, thanks in large part to a deft use of radio as a platform to reach a broader audience and the packaging of psychoanalytic theory in non-specialist vocabulary.¹¹ Schérer often singles out Dolto as emblematic of the influence of psycho-pedagogic approaches on mainstream ideas about childhood.¹²

From one perspective, the willingness of experts such as Dolto to talk frankly about sexuality and development was symptomatic of a progressive, liberalising shift in French society.¹³ In an influential study of sexual politics in France between 1950 and 1990, sociologist Janine Mossuz-Lavau identifies a transformation in adult attitudes towards the sexuality of young people in France in the post-68 period, claiming that 'après mai 68 il n'est plus possible de traiter les jeunes comme on les traitait auparavant [...] [ni] d'évoquer la sexualité dans les

10. Annick Ohayon, *L'Impossible rencontre: psychologie et psychanalyse en France, 1919–1969* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1999), p. 10.

11. Annick Ohayon, 'Françoise Dolto, le sacre de l'enfant', *Sciences humaines*, 199 (December 2008), 20.

12. See, for example, *Émile perverti* pp. 101–11; *Une érotique puérile*, pp. 44–5.

13. For an analysis of the interplay between the permissive and conservative aspects of Dolto's approach see Richard Bates, *Psychoanalysis and Child-Rearing in Twentieth-Century France: The Career of Françoise Dolto* (Unpublished thesis, University of Nottingham, 2017).

termes indirects'.¹⁴ Mossuz-Lavau charts the increasingly prominent place of youth sexuality in public debate in the early 1970s, especially around the issue of sex education in schools. In 1973, the French government inaugurated a programme of sex education, partly in response to lobbying by groups such as the left-leaning Information et éducation sexuelle (IES) established in 1969 and composed of teachers' unions, parents' groups, family planning groups and nurses.¹⁵ Whilst she acknowledges a limited impact from pushes for sex education, Mossuz-Lavau nonetheless argues that 1974 represented a watershed moment for the recognition of the sexuality of young people.¹⁶

Appearing that very year, *Émile perverti* refuses any such narrative of social progress. It sets out Schérer's critique of a growing sociological, medical and cultural focus on childhood, that he views as leading to further control over the lives of children. He views pedagogy, psychoanalysis and psychology as instrumental in the construction of a collective imaginary that conceives of childhood only as a precarious stage on the path to adult self-sufficiency. In an open letter to *Gai pied* at the end of the 1970s, Schérer summarizes his project as an attempt to counter the prevailing image of childhood derived from these fields of expertise.¹⁷ He views a discourse of rights and autonomy as emphasizing negative freedom, a regime of *noli me tangere*, in which young people are encouraged to refuse contact with adults other than parents, teachers or analysts in order to protect their developmental integrity.¹⁸

Schérer's critical attitude towards the experts he gathers together as *les psy* is closely aligned to his totalizing rejection of 'toutes les pratiques pédagogiques en cours' (p. 188), a stance that should be contextualized against a backdrop of dramatic changes in the educational landscape in France, marked by increased participation, institutional reform and an increased appetite for pedagogic innovation.¹⁹ Once more, Schérer's primary engagement is with ostensibly liberalizing approaches towards children's education. On the one hand, Schérer applauds the sentiment behind emancipatory pedagogic approaches gaining ground in France in the 1960s and 70s that were guided by the ideas of radical pedagogues such as Vera Schmidt (1889–1937), Célestin Freinet (1896–1966) and Fernand Deligny (1913–1966); he is also broadly sympathetic to institutional critique of schools

14. Janine Mossuz-Lavau, *Les Lois de l'amour: les politiques de la sexualité en France (1950–90)* (Paris: Payot, 1991), p. 146.

15. Mossuz-Lavau, *Les Lois de l'amour*, pp. 149–50.

16. Mossuz-Lavau, *Les Lois de l'amour*, p. 180.

17. René Schérer, 'Lettre ouverte', *Le Gai pied* (April 1980).

18. Schérer offers further precisions in this regard in: Jean Ristat, 'Rencontre avec René Schérer', in *Les Lettres françaises*, November 2010 (Supplement in *L'Humanité*, 6 November, 2010), pp. I–V (p. III).

19. See Antoine Prost, *Éducation, Société et Politiques* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992), pp. 160–1.

as offered by proponents of 'institutional pedagogy' in their description of *l'école-caserne*, or in Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, which was translated into French in 1971.²⁰ However, Schérer's subsequent rejection of what he broadly terms 'la pédagogie nouvelle' must be understood in relation to his deployment of an expansive definition of pedagogy, which he sees as extending throughout society rather than being contained within educational institutions and which he views as globally determining relationships between adults and children. He consequently views institutional critique and non-directive approaches as remaining within the dominant pedagogic regime – predicated on surveillance and the policing of desire – that he sets out to attack (*Le Corps interdit*, p. 114). In a section from *Émile perverti* entitled 'Sur la connivence entre la pédagogie nouvelle et l'ancienne', Schérer argues that the otherwise radical approaches of figures such as Schmidt, Freinet and Deligny uphold conventional sexual configurations and heteronormative narratives of social insertion (pp. 119–26). Progressive pedagogy's deployment of developmental models drawn from psychoanalysis and psychology is seen to negate, furthermore, the radical otherness of childhood: 'la pédagogie moderne, cette inquisition qui veut forcer les derniers retranchements du « mystère » de l'enfance en la psychologisant' (p. 37).

Schérer's critique can be situated in the context of a wider politicization of childhood which arose in the years around May '68. A recent collection of essays edited by Sophie Heywood entitled *Le '68 des enfants/The Children's '68* analyses a revolutionary turn in conceptions of childhood in this period, when children's culture became a locus for 'the political contestation of the age'.²¹ In particular, Heywood draws attention to a fracture between a 'caretaking' approach to childhood and a 'liberationist interpretation of children's rights activism', critical of 'the mediation of children's culture by specialists' and an overemphasis on the traumatic potential of childhood experience.²² Schérer's project can be seen to constitute an extreme example of this liberationist approach, as well as

20. Schérer, *Émile perverti*, pp. 21–2; Fernand Oury and Jacques Pain, *Chronique de l'école-caserne* (Paris: Maspéro, 1972); Ivan Illich, *Une société sans école*, transl. by Gérard Durand (Paris: Seuil, 1971).

21. Sophie Heywood, 'Children's 68: introduction', in *Le '68 des enfants/The Children's '68*, ed. by Sophie Heywood and Cécile Boulaire (*Strenae*, 13 (2018)), <<https://doi.org/10.4000/strenae.1998>> [accessed 18 December 2018].

22. Sophie Heywood, 'Power to Children's Imaginations. May '68 and Counter Culture for Children in France', in *Le '68 des enfants/The Children's '68*, ed. by Sophie Heywood and Cécile Boulaire (*Strenae*, 13 (2018)), <<https://journals.openedition.org/strenae/1838>> [accessed 18 December 2018]. Heywood takes the distinction between liberationist and caretaking approaches from Michael Grossberg, 'Liberation and Caretaking: Fighting over Children's Rights in Postwar America', in *Reinventing Childhood After World War II*, ed. by Paula S. Fass and Michael Grossberg (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 19–37.

a limit testing of the notion of ‘sexual revolution’ against which these debates unfolded.²³

The liberationist emphasis of Schérer’s work is in keeping with his presence, throughout the 1970s, at the University of Vincennes, an experimental institution established in the aftermath of May ’68 to accommodate demands for new educational structures and practices. Attracting prominent intellectuals such as Héléne Cixous, François Châtelet, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Vincennes broke down barriers to university enrolment, encouraged disciplinary exchange and innovation and promoted non-hierarchical relations amongst staff and students; it was thus in keeping with the radical, utopian ideas about education and group organization that Schérer valued in Fourier. Radical thinking about sexual revolution at the university made it a propitious environment for Schérer’s liberationist-oriented seminars on childhood, which fed into his publications throughout the decade. One of the university’s many appearances in the national media came when it sheltered a group of young runaways, fulfilling its reputation as ‘la fac ouverte à tous’.²⁴ Schérer’s attack on a repressive regime of child sexuality and his defence of paedophilia, analysed below, bear the mark of the university’s militant sexual politics and radical theories of desire. Radical feminism, gay rights activism and advocacy for the sexual freedom of young people converged in Vincennes-affiliated publications such as *Recherches* and *Tout!*, ‘one of the most widely read radical magazines’ in the post-68 period.²⁵ As well as acting as the mouthpiece for the Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire (FHAR), *Tout!* provided a forum for debates about children’s liberation and for championing a movement called the Front de libération des jeunes. Issues were emblazoned with statements such as ‘La parole aux lycéens’ (No. 11, March 1971), ‘Les mineurs ont droit au désir’ (No.12, April 1971) and ‘Votre libération sexuelle n’est pas la nôtre’ (No. 15, June 1971) – provocations that mark out central preoccupations of Schérer’s analysis in the following years. Schérer’s position on childhood sexuality, indeed, can be summed up by the uncompromising demand, articulated in the magazine, for ‘une totale liberté de pratique sexuelle et de jouissance vitale’.²⁶

23. On the contested notion of sexual revolution and liberation in the period see, for example: Anne-Claire Rebreyend, ‘May 68 and the Changes in Private Life: A ‘Sexual Liberation?’’, in *May 68: Rethinking France’s Last Revolution*, ed. by Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne and James S. Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 148–60; Ludivine Bantigny, ‘Quelle “révolution” sexuelle? Les politisations du sexe dans les années post-68’’, in *L’Homme et la société*, no. 189–90 (2013), 15–34; Gert Hekma and Alain Giami, ‘Sexual Revolutions: An Introduction’, in *Sexual Revolutions*, ed. by Gert Hekma and Alain Giami (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1–24.

24. See Verdrager, *L’Enfant interdit*, p. 88.

25. Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics and Morality in France from the Liberation to Aids* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2009), p. 184.

26. No. 8, 1 February 1971, p. 9.

Schérer's refusal of a dominant image of childhood shaped by developmental narratives and anxieties about deviant sexuality was also influenced by the radical philosophy of desire articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in their 1972 work *Anti-Œdipe* – perhaps the most iconic work to emerge from the Vincennes milieu.²⁷ In *Émile perversi*, Schérer recognizes the influence of this work on his own thinking, particularly its analysis of 'l'antériorité de l'adulte sur l'enfant et du rabatement qu'il opère constamment sur lui de ses propres limites' (p. 59). In *Mille plateaux* (1980), their follow-up to *Anti-Œdipe*, Deleuze and Guattari recognized in turn the originality and importance of Schérer's development of this critique, particularly in *Co-ire*, co-authored with Guy Hocquenghem, a writer and leading figure in gay rights activism through his involvement with the FHAR.²⁸ *Co-ire* appeared as an issue of the journal *Recherches* (1966–83), which was edited by Guattari and devoted a number of issues to childhood and education, another important and underexamined resource for radical conceptions of childhood in France in the period.²⁹

From pedagogic critique to a defence of paedophilia

Émile perversi offers the clearest description of the pedagogic regime that Schérer sees as restricting children's freedom. All of his subsequent works on childhood develop arguments put forward in this initial work. As its title indicates, *Émile perversi* takes shape around a discussion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, which Schérer sees, in conventional fashion, as a foundational text for Western pedagogic discourse (p. 22). Schérer's discussion of Rousseau is concentrated in an introductory chapter entitled 'Sous l'œil du maître'. He stresses that surveillance is essential to Rousseau's pedagogic project and deploys the image of the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's prison surveillance tower, as a metaphor for mechanisms of pedagogic surveillance and control.³⁰ Rousseau and modern experts on childhood share 'l'illusion [...] d'un discours cohérent embrassant la vie entière de l'enfant' (p. 21). Whilst Rousseau's critique of social progress and theory of 'negative education' might seem to chime with Schérer's rejection of society's dominant pedagogic practices, Schérer focuses his discussion on Rousseau's

27. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1. L'Anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972).

28. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), pp. 202–03.

29. See in particular: 7. *Enfance aliénée I* (1967); 8. *Enfance aliénée II* (1968); 9. *Analyse institutionnelle et pédagogie* (1969); 12. *Trois milliards de pervers* (1973); 23. *L'Enseignement. L'école primaire* (1976); 27. *Babillages. Des crèches aux collectivités d'enfants* (1977); 37. *Fous d'enfance. Qui a peur des pédophiles?* (1979).

30. Schérer's discussion of the panopticon precedes Foucault's deployment of it in *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), as Schérer points out in *Le Corps interdit*, p. 87.

exclusion of sexual desire from the pedagogic encounter.³¹ Although Émile's tutor attempts to foster autonomy in his charge, a careful eye is always trained over Émile's desire, which should be moderate rather than excessive; happiness, according to Rousseau, resulting from a balance being struck between desire and capacity.³² Desire that is excessive to this equilibrium threatens Émile's precarious progress, provoking a generalized anxiety on the part of the teacher. Émile is, as Schérer puts it, 'constamment au bord de la perte' (p. 25). He risks perversion not only by society's disturbing influence but also by his own impulses, which threaten his personal development and his full insertion into society. Through his discussion of *Émile*, Schérer proposes that the management and regulation of desire are central to the modern pedagogic paradigm, the prehistory of which Schérer traces back to 'Socrate castrateur', according to whose legacy '[celui] qui enseigne ne peut pas aimer ou, s'il aime [...] c'est d'une autre manière, d'où le désir du corps et la sexualité sont absents' (pp. 148–49).

Notoriously, this critique of the exclusion of sexual desire from the pedagogic encounter leads Schérer to promote the emancipatory potential of sex between adults and children. Throughout his writing on childhood, Schérer lent intellectual weight to what Julian Bourg terms 'French pedophilic discourse of the 1970s', a period in which prominent intellectuals supported calls for a liberalization of laws penalizing sex between children and adults.³³ In his study of paedophilia in France, Pierre Verdrager identifies Schérer and Foucault as the two philosophers who did the most in the 1970s to rationalize a relaxation of laws in this regard.³⁴ As Bourg and Foerster indicate, Foucault's greater prominence in subsequent debates about sex, power and consent should not occlude Schérer's contribution.³⁵ Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize Foucault's engagement in this context, particularly his diagnosis, in 1976's *La Volonté de savoir*, of the 'pédagogisation du sexe de l'enfant' as one of the determinant conjunctions of sexuality and power from the eighteenth century onwards.³⁶ As well as Schérer's *Émile perversi*, other interventions in 1974 came from writers such as Tony Duvert – whose *Le Bon sexe illustré* attacked Hachette's 1973 *Encyclopédie de la vie sexuelle* for being

31. Theorists close to Schérer who were interested in non-directive pedagogic approaches did engage with Rousseau's theory of negative education. See in this regard, George Lapassade's contribution to *Le Corps interdit*, entitled 'Ne pas intervenir', pp. 14–80.

32. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), see for example, the instruction to 'diminuer l'excès des désirs sur les facultés, et à mettre en égalité parfaite la puissance et la volonté', p. 94.

33. Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, p. 204.

34. Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit*, pp. 60–2.

35. Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, n.19, pp. 388–9; Foerster, *Penser le désir*, pp. 49–59.

36. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: la volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 137–8.

repressive of youth sexuality and ideologically motivated – and Gabriel Matzneff, who celebrated sex between adults and children in *Les Moins de seize ans*.³⁷ In the late 1970s, which saw a peak in activism aimed at lowering or abolishing the age of consent, these individuals played a key role in recruiting support from notable intellectuals – including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and significantly, given her influence on public views about childhood, Françoise Dolto – for petitions published in *Le Monde* and *Libération* in support of men prosecuted for having sex with children.³⁸ Foucault, indeed, was consulted by the government in the context of proposed changes to articles 330–333 of the Penal Code, which concerned the crimes of ‘outrage public à la pudeur’ and ‘attentat à la pudeur sans violence contre mineurs’.³⁹

In *Émile perversi*, Schérer praises Freud's account of children's ‘polymorphous perversity’ but regrets how psychoanalysis then channelled this discovery into heteronormative maturational narratives. He proposes, instead, the deployment of this polymorphous perversity within an orgiastic, utopian vision, owing much to Fourier, that celebrates ‘[la] séduction chatoyante des possibilités prégénitales libérant pour le désir toutes les zones du corps et tous les rôles’ (p. 68). Dreaming of a society unfettered by pedagogic power and anxieties about psychosexual maturity, Schérer imagines ‘un autre ordre, d'adultes et d'enfants mêlés passionnément’ (p. 177). Similar emphases appear throughout his work in the 1970s. In *Co-ire*, Schérer and Hocquenghem explore seduction and abduction (*rapt*) as means to free children from the sexually repressive spaces of the home and the school (pp. 9–37). In *Une érotique puérile*, Schérer argues that unleashing a ‘puerile erotic’ would exert an unruly and disruptive force on a repressive social order, a conception of child sexuality opposed to a ‘contractual’ model of child-adult relations (p. 20); the philosopher views pedagogic and legal discourses about children as betraying childhood's intrinsically excessive nature, which he explores in *Une érotique puérile* through the idea of ‘l'enfant démesuré’ (p. 25).

37. *Encyclopédie de la vie sexuelle*, 5 volumes (Paris: Hachette, 1973); Tony Duvert, *Le Bon sexe illustré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974); Gabriel Matzneff, *Les Moins de seize ans* (Paris: Julliard, 1974).

38. See Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, pp. 204–18; Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit*, pp. 38–44; Ambroise-Rendu, *Histoire de la pédophilie*, pp. 171–96.

39. See, in this regard, the transcript of a 1978 French radio interview involving Foucault, Hocquenghem and a lawyer called Jean Danet in which they argue against existing legislation on the age of consent: ‘La Loi de la pudeur’, in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, tome III: 1976–1979* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 763–77. This transcript has been a focus of feminist critiques of Foucault's treatment of consent, notably by Linda Alcoff: ‘Dangerous Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Pedophilia’, in Susan Hekman (ed.) *Feminist Interpretations of Foucault* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1996), pp. 99–135.

Schérer's defence of paedophilia, which constitutes the most theoretically developed set of arguments in this direction to emerge in France in the 1970s, should be rejected for a number of reasons, not least Schérer's unconvincing gesture to a utopian space 'outside' of pedagogic control in which the question of consent would no longer apply.⁴⁰ Linda Alcoff highlights an important contradiction whereby advocates of paedophilia – Alcoff's discussion focuses on Foucault's treatment of consent, but her arguments are equally pertinent to Schérer – resist applying 'the notion of consent to sexual practices, [...] [but] rely on just such a notion in their argument that not all sexual relations between adults and children are violent or exploitative'.⁴¹ The sociologist François de Singly rightly identifies a refusal on the part of pro-paedophilia activists to adequately address potential, if not *a priori*, inequalities of power between adults and children.⁴² Schérer is exemplary in this regard, as he is in refusing to elaborate a more sophisticated theory of children's freedom that would take their negative as well as positive freedom into account. Schérer's compelling evocations of the oppressive regulation of children's sexual desire and his persuasive analysis of the normative pathways towards adult sexuality are undermined by his failure to explore the question of sexual violence. This imbalance has persisted in Schérer's thinking. In the preface to the 2006 edition of *Émile perversi*, Schérer sees the policing of adult-child sexual relations primarily as symptomatic of neo-liberal individualism: 'Les corps privatisés ne font que se côtoyer dans leur solitude' (p. 11). This may be true, but important questions regarding abuse and children's capacity to consent to sexual relations remain unexplored. Schérer's defence of paedophilia privileges a non-discursive, non-specular zone of corporeal exchange he characterizes as liberating. This aspect of Schérer's work resonates with Foucault's contemporaneous call for a regime of 'bodies and pleasures' that would escape the oppressive demands of sexual identity.⁴³ However, Schérer's fantasy of a body removed from pedagogic capture risks idealizing the body 'as a principle of necessary and permanent disruption' – to cite Judith Butler's critical analysis of Foucault's injunction to 'bodies and pleasures', and never as a locus on which power is exercised.⁴⁴ There are, finally, internal contradictions to Schérer's critique: Verdrager highlights the philosopher's recourse to 'un argumentaire évolutionniste visant la « modernisation » de la loi par rapport à l'évolution des mœurs', which is at odds with Schérer's refusal of progress narratives.⁴⁵ Neither does Schérer shy away from enlisting

40. Schérer and Hocquenghem, *Co-ire*, p. 41.

41. Linda Alcoff, 'Dangerous Pleasures', p. 105.

42. In Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit*, pp. 11–12.

43. Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, p. 208.

44. Judith Butler, 'Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures', in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16:2 (1999), pp. 11–20 (p. 14).

45. Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit*, p. 48.

biological or psychological expertise about children where it suits his argument – noting, for example, variations in the onset of puberty – in spite of his attack on the scientific categorization of children.⁴⁶

A mainstream defence of sex between adults and children did not last, coming to appear damaging and ethically problematic to the sexual liberation movements with which it had briefly aligned.⁴⁷ The 'ideology of erotic self-determination' that had facilitated Schérer's defence of paedophilia in the 1970s lost ground to 'another of risk and protection'.⁴⁸ In *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought*, Bourq casts the pro-paedophilia movement as a misguided and failed project in a wider ethical turn in post-68 French thought.⁴⁹ Bourq is no doubt right in relation to Schérer's contribution to a defence of paedophilia. Nonetheless, the philosopher's work contains a number of interrelated provocations that could be framed as ethical and which are less easily dismissed.

Disturbing generational distinction: 'beyond' Schérer's defence of paedophilia

Despite the problematic centrality of intergenerational desire to Schérer's critique of childhood, his work merits revisiting for a number of concerns entangled with his views on child sexuality. There is, I would argue, a reversal of a traditional screen dynamic in relation to Schérer's work: if Freud made it a cultural commonplace to read sexuality into the ostensibly non-sexual, then contemporary readers risk missing the opposite function in Schérer's works; that is, failing to see the 'non-sexual' concerns caught up with Schérer's defence of paedophilia – a kind of black hole into which any associated discussion quickly disappears. If, as Beth Bailey asserts in an excellent essay entitled 'The Vexed History of Children and Sex', sex is foundational to the modern western demarcation between childhood and adulthood, then it is also true that the policing of child sexuality underpins a host of other social and cultural demarcations.⁵⁰ Anne-Claude Ambroise-Rendu, who has written a history of paedophilia in France, similarly recognizes how the debate about paedophilia and consent in the 1970s was about more than just child sexuality, which functioned as a metonymy for a constellation of social uncertainties.⁵¹

46. Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit*, pp. 48–49.

47. Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit*, p. 115; Ambroise-Rendu, *Histoire de la pédophilie*, pp. 197–200.

48. Hekma and Giami, *Sexual Revolutions*, p. 54.

49. Bourq, *From Revolution to Ethics*, pp. 219–20.

50. Beth Bailey, 'The Vexed History of Children and Sex', in *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World*, ed. by Paula Fass (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 191–210 (p. 191).

51. Anne-Claude Ambroise-Rendu, 'L'abus sexuel sur les enfants et la question du consentement au XIX^e et XX^e siècles', in *Les Jeunes et la sexualité: initiations, interdits*,

In *Une érotique puérile*, Schérer describes the interaction of adulthood and childhood as ‘une clarification de l’un par l’autre, une disciplinarisation réciproque’ (p. 11). In this sense, Schérer’s work on childhood is always, simultaneously, a discussion of adulthood. The writer and child psychotherapist Adam Phillips has drawn attention to the preponderant place of child sexuality – and especially anxieties about the sexual abuse of children – in the sexual self-awareness of adults. Phillips asserts that ‘[one] can, and should, disapprove of the sexual abuse of children without denying that it raises some unsettling questions about sexuality, about its uncertain measure in our lives’.⁵² One motivation for policing child sexuality is no doubt to secure the illusion of adulthood as the domain of sexual maturity, self-awareness and full social insertion. In *Émile perversi*, Schérer persuasively argues that adult regulation of child sexuality is symptomatic of a foundational malaise in adult self-understanding, which he describes as ‘l’attitude de l’adulte devant une région de lui-même mal définie, inquiétante’ (p. 123). Schérer’s arguments against viewing childhood as a relative state of ‘incompletion’ or latency simultaneously challenge the construction of adult sexuality, and thus adulthood more generally, as completion or telos.⁵³ It is not to mitigate the ethical shortcomings of Schérer’s thought to argue that some of its unsettling features – all the more troubling for being embedded within a defence of paedophilia – can be traced to an anxiety proper to the policing of generational difference.

This provides one way of framing the provocation of Schérer and Hocquenghem’s turn, in *Co-ire*, to abduction as a means of liberating children from the secure bounds of a social order predicated on generational difference (all the more provocative for their vagueness as to whether ‘abduction’ is to be understood in a literal or figurative sense). For Schérer and Hocquenghem, the violence of abduction makes possible a relation that is neither familial nor pedagogic in nature, perverting the developmental trajectories through which adults find edifying reflections of their own identities (p. 13). The status of this relation is uncertain, abduction also disrupting conventional modes of expression:

Que sera l’enfant aux côtés d’un ravisseur, pédéraste ou non: son garçon ou sa fille, son disciple, son élève, son apprenti, son comparse? Les mots manquent pour désigner la chose. On avait le page, le béjaune, le bardache ; mais, de toute façon, la relation est inclassable: de là son scandale et son prix. (p. 27)

identités, ed. by Véronique Blanchard, Régis Revenin and Jean-Jacques Yvorel (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2010), pp. 224–232 (p. 227).

52. Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises: Essays on Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 101.
53. See, for example, *Émile perversi*, p. 55. On the conception of adulthood as completion, Schérer acknowledges the influence of George Lapassade’s *L’Entrée dans la vie, essai sur l’inachèvement de l’homme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963), *Émile perversi*, p. 57.

Co-ire's celebration of abduction exemplifies the ethical shortcomings previously set out; yet here, as elsewhere, Schérer's work simultaneously foregrounds the ways in which anxieties about child protection and vulnerability, with the proportion of irrationality and displacement common to all anxieties, underpin generational distinctions. Schérer's celebration of abduction or intergenerational desire should not preclude a return to his work for considerations of the thorny issue of how adult anxiety determines the limits of children's sociality. Schérer's writing demands of its reader, if nothing else, increased attentiveness to these limits. It indicates how an emancipatory conception of pedagogy might necessarily demand new attitudes towards risk and danger; an injunction to rethink Rousseau's qualification of *Émile*'s freedom as 'la liberté *bien réglée*'.⁵⁴ It underlines, furthermore, the complex reach of generational distinctions in the social fabric, attuning the reader to what Pierre Bourdieu identified, in an essay entitled 'La jeunesse n'est qu'un mot', as the stabilizing social function of age categories and thus the disturbances arising from their contestation. In Bourdieu's formulation: 'lorsque le « sens des limites » se perd, on voit apparaître des conflits'.⁵⁵

In this regard, there are unexamined continuities between Schérer's work on childhood and recent Anglophone scholarship adopting queer theoretical perspectives on the intersection between age and sexuality. Whilst Michel Foucault's work is routinely cited in this context, Schérer's specific contribution to a critical interrogation of generational distinction has largely disappeared from view, in spite of Schérer's more sustained enquiry in this direction. In an edited volume entitled *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004) Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley see a queer inflection to childhood when it challenges the 'supposedly blissful promises of adult heteronormativity' and when children show an interest in 'cross-generational attachments'.⁵⁶ Given the relevance of Schérer's work to these lines of enquiry, his absence from the collection's essays – otherwise *au fait* with French theoretical vocabularies from the 1970s – is notable. Schérer's writing could also fruitfully be brought into dialogue with work by the theorist Steven Angelides, who, in an essay entitled 'Feminism, Child Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality' (2004), calls for queer theorists to examine 'the epistemological relationship between sexuality and age' and to interrogate a 'sequential model of age stratification premised on distinct chronological, spatial, and temporal stages of biological and psychological development'.⁵⁷ To this extent, I want to argue for

54. Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 110, my emphasis.

55. In Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984), pp. 143–54 (p. 154).

56. Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2004), pp. ix–x.

57. Steven Angelides, 'Feminism, Child Sexual Abuse, and the Erasure of Child Sexuality', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10:2 (2004), 141–77 (p. 163).

Schérer's neglected contribution to a queer conception of age stratification. If nothing else, attempting to think 'beyond' Schérer's defence of paedophilia serves to indicate how messy the entanglement of age and sex is.

Relevant, here, is Schérer's attempt to imagine the 'contemporaneity' of adults and children in order to counter the future-orientation of the pedagogic regime. In their essay on queer childhood, Bruhm and Hurley stress that 'the language of child sexuality is [...] strictly governed by the language of temporality'.⁵⁸ Schérer's interrogation of the dominant cultural narratives that shape children's development is instructive in this regard. Indeed, one way of viewing *Co-ire*'s celebration of abduction is as an attempt to disturb the disjunctive temporalities dividing children from adults; to remove children, that is, from the futurity projected upon them by adults. In *Émile perversi*, Schérer quotes Dionysodorus' sophist quip to Socrates in Plato's *Euthydemus*: Dionysodorus characterizes pedagogic desire as the desire for the death of the individual in their present state: 'Puisque vous voulez qu'il ne soit plus ce qu'il est à présent, c'est apparemment que vous désirez sa mort'.⁵⁹ According to this logic, pedagogy strives, in its insistence on future acquisitions, for the loss of the singularity of the present. In *Co-ire*, Schérer and Hocquenghem connect this future-oriented desire to a lack within language for the description of non-developmental, non-teleological intimacies between adults and children:

L'enfant n'est pas « l'avenir de l'homme », il en est le *contemporain*, porté par un désir qui n'est pas celui de la paternité ni d'éducation, qui ne renvoie à aucune grille pédagogique; [...] [qui] n'est connoté par rien dans la langue, l'innommable. (p. 29, my emphasis)

Contemporaneity, here, effaces hierarchies of experience; it disturbs generational distinction and consequently adult self-awareness. This resonates with something Kristin Ross has identified in the work of Jacques Rancière, one of Schérer's contemporaries at Vincennes. The kind of pedagogy to which Rancière is drawn, writes Ross, seeks to 'eliminate or short-circuit the very temporality of the pedagogical relation'.⁶⁰ If a 'pedagogic' idea exists in Schérer's work, then it is one that problematizes pedagogy's future-orientation and etymological roots in guidance, highlighting Schérer's investment in 'ce qui est engagé dans l'actuel et qui disparaît dans la forme spéciale de devenir que lui impose l'adulte' (*Émile perversi*, p. 153). The influence of Schérer's thinking around contemporaneity can be detected, as mentioned earlier, in Deleuze and Guattari's receptivity to his work

58. Bruhm and Hurley, *Curiouser*, p. xviii.

59. In *Émile perversi*, p. 153.

60. Kristin Ross, 'Historicizing Untimeliness', in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 15–29, (pp. 25–6).

with Hocquenghem. In their account of a *devenir-enfant* in *Mille plateaux* (1980) Deleuze and Guattari advocate 'la stricte contemporanéité de l'enfant et de l'adulte' over the generational distinctions that determine the social and political status of children.⁶¹ In this context, they praise Schérer and Hocquenghem for their attempt, in *Co-ire*, to think alternative forms of becoming for the child, 'indépendamment de l'évolution qui entraîne vers l'adulte'.⁶² Reflecting in 2010 on his work on childhood, Schérer characterizes 'contemporaneity' as a form of responsibility towards children, talking of 'l'enfant en face de nous, notre contemporain', or 'l'enfant interlocuteur, notre associé, notre contemporain'.⁶³ This is not the protective responsibility towards children that Schérer views as domineering and undercut by anxiety, but rather a responsibility towards the present encounter.

Alongside this interest in temporality, Schérer's project as a whole is marked by an unresolved uncertainty as to childhood's distinctiveness. This manifests as a form of representational reticence on the part of the philosopher. It can be detected, for instance, in Schérer and Hocquenghem's claim that their project is purely 'descriptive' rather than investigative or analytical (p. 7). Subtitled 'album systématique de l'enfance', *Co-ire* draws on a patchwork of literary evocations of errant children, referencing works by Robert Louis Stevenson, Victor Hugo, Henry James, Vladimir Nabokov, Michel Tournier, Tony Duvert and others. Schérer and Hocquenghem explain their recourse to literature in the following terms:

[Nous] allons d'abord et par principe aux romanciers surtout qui ont le mieux parlé de l'enfance, parce qu'ils n'ont pas eu le souci de l'expliquer ni de la guider. Nous ne sommes pas portés sur la révélation, surtout pas sur la révélation de l'enfance. Nous n'avons rien cherché derrière l'écran, mais juste à faire glisser les images sur la page. [...] Avec le parti-pris systématique de suggérer plutôt, d'évoquer. (p. 7)

It is far from clear, however, why 'literary' evocations of childhood could not also be theoretical or analytical in nature and *Co-ire* can be critiqued, as indeed can Schérer's project more generally, for the kind of assumptions it makes about the singular status of literary discourse.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the turn to literature is revealing in as much as it encapsulates Schérer's wider struggle with adult perspectives on childhood. The valorization of the 'surface' qualities of literary representation – seen in the preceding quotation in the evocation of childhood as a depthless screen, and through the fleeting succession of images across the surface of

61. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), pp. 202–03.

62. Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, p. 335.

63. Jean Ristat, 'Rencontre avec René Schérer', p. iii.

64. As well as the numerous examples in *Co-ire*, see the extended discussion of Balzac's *Louis Lambert* in *Une érotique puérile*, pp. 153–7.

the page – must be understood in relation to Schérer’s broader resistance to the ‘profundity’ of psychological investigation, as well as his celebration of the ‘puerile’ as a desirable form of superficiality. If, as noted earlier in relation to *Émile perversi*, Schérer attacks the pedagogic regime for its fantasy of a coherent and totalizing discourse about children, then the turn to literature reveals Schérer’s quest for an oblique, rather than direct, mode of representation. Literature’s quality of ‘obliqueness’ would be opposed, amongst other things, to the progressive ‘frankness’ of *les psy* and the radical pedagogues that Schérer criticizes throughout the 1970s.

If, then, Schérer is compelled to evoke alternative visions of childhood, propelled by a utopian impulse inherited from Fourier, he simultaneously draws back from representation, aware of the ways in which his stated ambition to propose ‘une nouvelle figure de l’enfance’ is at odds with his simultaneous desire not to speak on behalf of children.⁶⁵ Ambroise-Rendu, in her comments on Schérer in *Histoire de la pédophilie*, characterizes the philosopher’s ambition in the 1970s as: ‘l’invocation d’une altérité radicale d’un enfant qui reste encore à décrypter, à comprendre et à aimer convenablement, loin des figures d’une enfance essentialisée qui dominent la *doxa*.’⁶⁶ Note the tension, here, between an ‘invocation’ of children’s radical alterity and an ever-deferred task of decipherment and comprehension. Schérer’s project hovers between an assertion of children’s singular nature and an uncompromising conception of equality that tends towards an erasure of their essential difference from adults.

This oscillation constitutes an ethical dimension of his project that cannot be dismissed solely on the grounds of his defence of paedophilia. Here, as elsewhere, disentangling non-sexual concerns from Schérer’s promotion of sex between adults and children – thinking ‘beyond’ his defence of paedophilia – remains an uncomfortable critical exercise. Therein lies its value, perhaps. Critical discussions such as those offered by Adam Phillips and Beth Bailey are laudable for combining a firm rejection of paedophilia and the sexual abuse of children with a frank acknowledgment of the ‘uncertain measure’ of sexuality in conceptions of age and maturity, or the role of ‘gut-level certainties’ in the policing of child sexuality.⁶⁷ Whilst the non-sexual facets of Schérer’s project might never be fully extricated from the erotic emphases of his work, attending to the complexity of their interrelation remains a productive task, forcing readers to confront sexuality’s role as a quilting point for a range of issues determining the cultural legibility of both childhood and adulthood.

65. ‘Lettre ouverte’, *Le Gai pied* (April 1980).

66. Ambroise-Rendu, *Histoire de la pédophilie*, p. 180.

67. Phillips, *Promises, Promises*, p. 101; Bailey, ‘The Vexed History of Children and Sex’, p. 206.