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Heather Kaplan

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Visualizing Spaces of Childhood

by Heather G. Kaplan

Exploring Playgrounds in an American City

Spaces established by adults, such as playgrounds, where children's activity and play is so greatly monitored and regulated, can be examined in order to explore and understand constructions of childhood and the politics of the spaces children inhabit. In a class dealing with notions of the city, built environment, and material culture, I attempted to locate evidence of children's spaces and focused my photographs and observations on city playgrounds. While I found evidence of children's culture, I also found complex spaces created for and about children that were, however, not necessarily exclusively children's spaces; while intended for children, the playground spaces reflected as much or more about adult positions and needs. This paper seeks to examine the constructed nature of the barrier between spaces of childhood and adulthood through an exploration of cultural and political representation. These modes of representation can not only give us insight into our understanding of children and children's culture, but also provide a lens with which to look back at our culture and ourselves.

At the lively playground just down the road from my apartment, I observed children play; they were often accompanied or assisted by adults. Their play took many forms, and I returned to this playground over several weeks, capturing interactions with my camera and feverishly trying to jot down representative notes. It was not the only playground I visited, but it was the closest and reliably flourishes with activity. Fortunately for my purposes, it continued to be a busy place even into the cooler months, and I was able both to chart my progress across the city, gathering data from playground to playground, while spending the most time at my neighborhood playground. Throughout the process, I was hopeful that my observations, both written and photographic, would help me understand the nature of the architectures, the built environments, and the city spaces of childhood and their relationships to the politics and visualization of space.

In an attempt to make sense of the built environment and childhood places, I reviewed my notes and revisited my photographs. Through the selection and review process, I realized the complexity of visualizing and describing a place, a space, and a moment. I began to examine my choices and to examine my own ideas about children and childhood. Photographic and written representations are certainly helpful research tools, but at the same time, they describe only a single moment and a single perspective within a far more complex threshold of space and time. That threshold contains the

potential for a myriad of competing and complex perspectives, not just in the meaning and politics of the space, but also in its representations, visualization, and form and structure.

Images and Spaces of Childhood

Both photography and observation are visual methods of examination and interpretation. In choosing to record or document space through visual methods, I inadvertently set up a conundrum for myself—the difficulty of translation between the visual and the actual, between two-dimensional theoretical space and three-dimensional lived space. I also had to contend with the possibility of multiple viewpoints and the politics of representation. These factors combined and came to a head in my methodological decision to use photo documentation and written observation, leading me to ask what could be learned about spaces of childhood through visual representations. Essentially, I came to ask: How do representations of children and images of childhood affect our understanding of children and children’s spaces?

In seeking to understand the relationship between images and space, I am in essence asking what the relationship between imaging and ontology is. In other words, I am questioning how representation affects ways of being and living by asking: How do images frame reality, contribute to our understanding of others, and hold sway in our conceptions of others and ourselves? Furthermore, how can we reconceptualize these spaces and relationships in order to picture a more accurate and principled paradigm? What forms of visuality would this reconceptualization take?

When visualizing children and childhood, it is important to examine the relationship between images and ideology. Images are constructions or cultural productions which convey messages that can affect or impact our understanding of our selves, our culture, and others. Images can affect our ideology and our system of belief, which are also culturally constructed and flexible. Because images impact our system of belief, they in turn affect our ways of being, doing, seeing, and understanding. Images are so closely linked to our beliefs that the two terms are interchangeable. “An image of a child” can refer both to the literal image of a child or to the idea of a child and the belief of what a child is. Additionally, our beliefs about children and our images of them affect our understanding of children’s spaces and the space of childhood.¹ Similarly, children’s spaces have much to tell us about the philosophical, epistemological, and ontological impact of our views about children.

¹The term children’s spaces refers to spaces that children might claim for themselves, often where children are provided ownership and power to claim a space of being and knowing. Conversely, the term space of childhood refers to a space that adults set aside for children, one that is defined by, in relation to, and for the express purpose of defining the construct of adult.

What images do we see when we speak of the child, children, and childhood? This epistemological and ontological question abounds in assumptions regarding agency, ability, power, and control. How we identify, know, name, and set the child apart from the adult, and how we differentiate the space(s) of childhood from those of adulthood, has as much to do with our conceptions of ourselves as it does with the children we are identifying (Duncum, 2002). According to Duncum, children never were what they were. He elucidates the constructed nature of childhood, claiming, “Our ideas about children are constructed from historical processes and contemporary social pressures” (Duncum, 2002, p. 104). Additionally, he describes the ideological and theoretical implications of this construction, which creates a notion of childhood that is a misrepresentation, a selfish delusion, or a falsehood. Just as important, he identifies the idea of visuality and the process of imaging (meaning both picture-making and the ability to imagine or conceive of an idea or image) as key components in both creating and dismantling cultural concepts.

According to Moss and Petrie (2002), questioning the image of the child reveals the constructed nature of the terms children and childhood. Moss and Petrie also note that such questioning is central to reenvisioning childhood and children. By questioning the assumptions underlying the construction of childhood (i.e., the images of children and childhood), educators at the world-renowned Reggio Emilia childcare centers are able to reenvision a different construct of childhood, one where children are fuller, more powerful, more capable, and more agentic citizens within the community. Malaguzzi (1993), the first head of early childhood education at Reggio Emilia, explained:

Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them as only engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical, and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the affective domain. Instead, our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all, connected to adults and other children. (p. 10)

Childhood as Heterotopia

Our modern conception of childhood is a construction, one that is created in stark opposition to adulthood; the child is neither adult nor recognizable without being compared to the adult. This quality of being neither here (adult) nor there (recognizable without the construct of adult) is the hallmark of what Foucault (1967/1984) terms a heterotopia. Childhood is a space set aside from or a countersite to adulthood. It is both a space and a time carved out of the space and time of adulthood, and yet the thing (childhood) that is carved is both made of and set aside from what it was carved from

(adulthood). It is a space imbued with ideals that are greater than those found in adulthood, such as safety (Blackford, 2004), innocence, and potential (Duncum, 2002). Childhood becomes a space of restriction and caution set against privileges and affordances of adulthood.

According to Foucault (1967/1984), a heterotopia is an enacted utopia—i.e., a real, performed, lived space. Because a heterotopia is both a utopia and a real space—unlike a utopia—and because heterotopias are “absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about” (Foucault 1967/1984, p. 4), these spaces might be considered both reflections or illusions and sites of otherness, difference, alterity, and liminality. Childhood is a utopia in its idyllic fabrications. Childhood is a heterotopia.

Foucault (1967/1984) uses the following metaphor when elaborating the difference between spaces of utopia and heterotopia:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. (p. 4)

Hultquist (2001) also employs the metaphor of the mirror to describe the space and apparatus of childhood and states, “Childhood... is not the natural space of the child...[but] a technology that fabricates the child in the ‘mirror’ of the imaginaries, theories and ways of reasoning that delineates such a space for the child” (p. 21).

Both Hultquist (2001) and Foucault (1967/1984) address the idea of exteriority and difference as illusion. Foucault (1967/1984) declares:

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes the place that I occupy at the moment I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since

in order to be perceived it has to pass through a virtual point which is over there. (p. 4)

In both instances, the mirror is a metaphor for displacement: displacement of self through vision, displacement as a space of the other, and displacement as an ontology that bewilders wholeness through notions of the real, unreal, and virtual. It is this metaphor of visibility, through the illusion of the mirror, which helps to elucidate how heterotopia functions and reflects the gaze of the panopticon. It is not that the subjectivity created through the gaze and self-surveillance is negated, but rather that its very claim to reality is confused, complicated, and critiqued. The gaze is absorbed and reflected from two different positions: one real, the other unreal.

The mirror creates an unreal illusion of the child, an illusion that reflects virtues, such as innocence or purity, that are outside of or fantastical to the adult realm. At the same time, the adult recognizes, through the image of the child, a real lacking in her- or himself—a sort of dislocation or difference. Here again the visual principles—illusion and recognition—place vision central to ontology and epistemology, knowing and being. The image of the child and the way we envision childhood space reflect a politics and a position, a way of seeing and being in the world. If we view children as merely mirrors to our own politics and position, might we eclipse children's seeing, knowing, or being?

Playground as Visionary Space of Childhood

Space, like images and imaging, involves politics and power. And when we refer to the space of childhood, we can mean either quite literally the physical space of the child as defined by adults or the state of being that childhood connotes. Two different conceptions and visualizations of the same space, the playground, will be explored below. These disparate iterations of playground space conceptualize two very different visions of childhood. The first notion of space, the panopticon, envisions a totalizing, utopic notion of surveillance and institutional control. The second conception of space, heterotopia, imagines a complex countersite of exteriority.

The panopticon is a theoretical model that describes how systemic power hinges on architectures of the gaze, relying on the mechanisms of site and sight. Foucault (1975/1995) describes it as way to understand the dispersed yet utopic, totalizing power of gaze as it is played out through architecture and designed to promote self-policing. He explains how the power of the collective is dispersed through the structure of individual cells and limited visibility: “The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separate individualities” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 198). Blackford (2004) notes that the

overall structure affords the few control over the many and that the architecture creates a visuality that embodies “the very suggestion of constant surveillance” (p. 227).

According to Foucault (1975/1995), the modern prison is a prime example of the architecture of the panopticon. He explains how this architecture engineers control through both sight and site:

The arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes on [those within]...an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility. And this invisibility is a guarantee of order... If the inmates...are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no waste of time. (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 197)

Playground architecture often mimics the panoptic prison and prison tower that Foucault (1975/1995) articulates as utopic prison architecture. What is important about this similarity is not just that the architecture of the two is alike in form, but that it is alike in function and purpose as well. Considering that the panopticon was not merely a marvel of modern architecture but also a mechanism of systemic power achieved by controlling the individual, primarily through visualization and visuality, the structural comparison between the playground and a prison has staggering, serious implications. Our conceptions of the playground and children’s play as innocent, politically neutral, safe, or sweet are shattered by the comparison to a prison and the realization that playground structures educate children about power and self-policing through exercises in visuality. It is difficult to view children’s spaces and play sentimentally when one is confronted with the ramifications of children’s subjectivity under such circumstances.

The neighborhood playground near my apartment is a prime example of such architecture. It is in a park that is located where two streets converge, forming a “Y.” As a result, the park and playground resemble a shield or rounded triangle. The park is surrounded on all three sides by houses that face toward it. At the apex of the triangle, there is a relatively open grassy area where sporting games can be played. Because neither trees nor large structures obstruct the line of sight to that area, it becomes a stage that is visible in the round, and all the actors there can be scrutinized from multiple vantage points. The main play area, with a towering jungle gym, is at the base of the triangle, directly across from a row of onlooking houses. At the central and highest point of the structure there is a hexagonal turret, open on all sides, which effectively offers multiple vistas. The structure strongly resembles a watchtower (see Figure 1).

A centralized and elevated watchtower is the hallmark of playgrounds that conforms to Foucault’s panopticon in both form and function. The politics of the gaze play out in this elevated arena.

Characteristically, this architecture allows children to climb to a level that is usually one to two times their standing height and takes the form of a circle or multisided polygon such as a hexagon or octagon. This design allows for an unobstructed 360° view of the surrounding area and makes the viewer visible to those below being viewed. This elevation and visual access provide both an understanding of the way that vision and visibility work and an increased sense of vulnerability and exposure.

It is this dual nature of vision that reinforces the lesson of the gaze. As the child plays on this elevated stage, the position and power of prison supervisor, manager, teacher, parent, and adult are played out and become real through the watchtower vantage point. The child experiences what it is to see, to gaze out upon others, and to take in vistas. S/he quite literally experiences and internalizes the gaze as s/he wields it. Because this action is twofold, it is important to heed Foucault's (1975/1995) tocsin, "Visibility is a trap" (p. 197).

The playground reverses the power of the panopticon; while children play, learning the ways vision and the gaze work, the adults in the community, unseen from nearby residences, can effectively gaze upon the children. According to Foucault (1975/1995), ordinarily "the panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen" (p. 198). The playground effectively flips this relationship, and the see/being seen dyad is the affective tool for reinforcing the power of the gaze. The child understands that in seeing, s/he is also being seen by an unseen entity. Whether that entity is real or imagined is of no consequence; what does matter is that this visual system is internalized.

In other words, it is the child's awareness of his/her own vision and understanding of visibility that are the mechanisms through which the child internalizes the gaze. The community no longer needs to regulate the child on the playground, because the child has internalized the possibility for policing and polices him-/herself. As Blackford (2004) states, "Adults want children to believe that they are seen.



Figure 1. Watchtower play structure in my neighborhood



Figure 2. Another example of a centralized play area

Although supervision is equated with keeping children safe, panopticism also seeks to produce a certain kind of subjectivity in children, an internalization of discipline through self-monitoring” (p. 228).

There are many versions of the basic watchtower design, including structures with various kinds of add-ons and offshoots as well as unique variations—for example, a watchtower with musical symbols and mechanisms for making music, built within a larger playground pavilion dedicated to the same theme (see Figures 2 and 3). But however varied and unique these structures are, they all adhere to the same archetypal lookout or prison watchtower structure, embodying systemic power and dispersed control through visibility.

While the playground is often a site of institutional control, are there times when it isn't? The totalizing, utopic, and inescapable narrative of the playground panopticon might seem ubiquitous, but there may be countersites, alternative spaces, and different ways to understand that narrative. Indeed, Foucault (1967/1984) describes one such space, the heterotopia—a small or sustainable utopia outside of a larger system. He defines the heterotopia as a countersite where all the other sites of a culture are represented, even if they are challenged or upturned, and states:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (Foucault, 1967/1984, p. 3)

For Foucault, a heterotopia can be either a physical space or a condition of being. He describes crisis heterotopias of primitive societies as states of being that are set aside as “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (Foucault, 1967/1984, p.4). Adolescent children, menstruating women, pregnant women, and the elderly are among those in a state of crisis. The common thread between these states of being is that (depending on the society) they take place exterior to the space



Figure 3. Music-themed watchtower play structure

of everyday societal norms and states of being; they “take place ‘elsewhere’” (Foucault 1967/1984, p. 4).

As discussed above, childhood is a heterotopia, a countersite set aside from and exterior to—yet directly related to and entirely dependent upon—the construct of adulthood. While the playground is quite literally a space set aside for children and could therefore be considered a heterotopia on that basis alone, below I elucidate additional

criteria and instances of heterotopic counternarratives located within and about the playground.

Repurposing, misusing, reusing, and reappropriating—climbing upon or onto equipment and exploring it in irregular ways—are all means through which children interrupt institutional control and create spaces of their own cultural production, whether intentionally, accidentally, or spontaneously. Yet these productions are viewed in relationship to or as a reflection of—and different from—the “intended” or institutional purpose of the space. As such, these sites of reuse, misuse, and reappropriation are counternarratives that reflect the institutional narrative. They are heterotopic.

For example, the slide is a piece of equipment that is recurrently misused or, rather, reused. I prefer the term reused because it implies that children have reappropriated the slide and created multiple possible uses for it, rather than that those alternate uses are inferior or improper. The towheaded toddler depicted below (see Figure 4) is testing her physical boundaries by using her whole body to climb on a metal slide. This action is just barely within her physical limits and, balanced on her belly, she explores and accomplishes. While we may dismiss her actions because we consider her too young to climb any higher or normalize her actions as merely the explorations of a toddler, she is nonetheless ascribing her own purpose to and offering a different use for this apparatus.



Figure 4. Towheaded toddler on slide

The following photographs (Figures 5 and 6) depict the enactment of counternarratives to adult prescriptions of safe or predictable playground play. We see a young girl climbing up the exterior of a slide. She is exploring its form and function in a manner that is consistent with her ability and agility. In fact, her actions might be considered quite tame given how capable and careful she is. However, in relationship to the “intended” or “agreed upon” use of the apparatus, this kind of behavior is often deemed by adults to be unsafe, unwelcome, objectionable, or even out of control. While the photograph allows us to view the counteractions of a young girl perched on the exterior of an enclosed twisted tubular slide, what we do not see is the child’s point of view. Not only is she reinterpreting and reusing the slide, but as she does, she is also changing her vantage point and viewpoint. If she used the slide in a conventional way, her vision would be obscured by the shape and enclosure of the tube. By crawling along the exterior of the slide, she is able to reenvision and reestablish her perspective. Vistas, views, scenes, and sites open up to her.



Figure 5. Young girl perched on slide

The following observation offers another example of heterotopia:

When the “age-appropriate” or “size-appropriate” swings are already occupied, and therefore unavailable, two seven- or eight-year-old girls opt to play on the baby swings. One child plays the role of mother, the other of baby. Their conversation reveals that they both are conscious of the

constructions and restrictions that the apparatus places on their play and on their bodies.

First, the girl who plays the baby exclaims that her “butt doesn’t fit” in the baby swing, and she swings, perched with her legs bent over the edge of the bucket, as the second girl pushes her as a mother would a child. Later, after repositioning her body, the girl on the swing is able to sit inside



Figure 6. Young girl twisting to look around

the small bucket. Exclaiming, “This is embarrassing, I’m too tiny!” the girl acknowledges the poor fit between the size of her body and the markers of age and childhood. She senses a space for silliness, caricature, and critique, and her remarks become sing-song-y, playful, and more abundant. She teases, “I have a tiny butt. Mama, I’m in the baby swing. Push me!” The girl playing along in the role of the mother replies, “You’re going to go to preschool on Monday!” This statement sets off a round of silly giggles and further requests of “Push me!” As the performance progresses it becomes sillier. The girl who had previously called attention to the small size of her bottom now draws attention to the act of being pushed on swing. She simultaneously giggles and speaks in a baby voice. “No touchie,” she says in response to the awkward necessity of having her bottom touched by the other girl in order to be pushed on the swing— while at the same time, she implores, “Push me as high as you can!” She intermixes these orders with a made-up song that hovers between talking to herself and baby talk. “Baby swing...Na na na!” she repeats, again and again.

The girls make a game of this reuse. They play with the constructions of childhood and childhood spaces as they reuse and reappropriate the swing. The girls mimic and mirror the conventions of age-appropriate play as they perform age-specific roles. Neither girl “acts” her age, yet each age and action, like Foucault’s mirror metaphor, is interpreted through the space (or actual age) the girls are in.

Children’s Spaces and the Possibility of a Third Space

Reworking Bhabha’s (1994) postcolonial notion of hybridity or “third space,” Wilson (2003, 2004, 2005) theorizes three pedagogical sites of art education. Because Wilson’s theory, like Bhabha’s, imagines new, hybrid structures of authority, it is also referred to as “third space.” In an attempt to break structural binaries and to embrace new forms of community and collaboration, this theory visualizes three distinct spaces of art production. The first site is defined by spaces of production exterior to formal art educational institutions. Wilson (2005) refers to this as “the vast ‘territory’ containing many informal spaces outside of and beyond classrooms where kids...construct their own visual cultural texts and consume the visual cultural texts made by others” (p. 18). The second site consists of conventional art classrooms as defined by schools, museums, and community art studios. The third pedagogical site is a site of hybridity, betwixt and between (Bhabha, 1994), where the traditional art classroom and Wilson’s (2005) first space of “self-initiated visual cultural spaces” (p. 18) collide to create a kind of community through collaboration between adult and children.

While Foucault (1967/1984) addressed heterotopia in terms of the condition of being, the notion of space as a countersite harkens to Bhabha’s (in Rutherford, 1990) notion of difference, alterity and liminal spaces, or spaces betwixt and between. Similarly, Wilson’s (2003, 2004, 2005) first site, the site

of self-initiated cultural production, is also a site of liminality, difference, and alterity. It is set outside of and in counterproduction to the institutional site of traditional art education. It is heterotopic in that Wilson conceives of it as somewhat of a lived utopia, an idealized space and Lord-of-the-Flies-esque site of unsupervised counterculture; however, it is also a space that is defined by, and a reflection of, another space.

This paper explores the first and second sites of cultural production as they pertain to playgrounds. What is left unexplored are the implications for a more inclusive cultural production, one where “creative play and participation with wood, hammers, nails and fire, [evolves] to creative play and participation with the total process of design and planning of regions in cities” (Nicholson, 1973, p. 8), or rather, one where children are viewed as contributing, capable members of a community.

As Bhabha (in Rutherford, 1990) claimed, the notion of a third space of difference, alterity, and hybridity hinges on an in-betweenness, a space of fluidity where new forms and structures are possible. He states:

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which a third emerges. Hybridity to me is the third space, which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhabha, in Rutherford, 1990, p. 211)

When addressing childhood and childhood spaces, what if we were to embrace Bhabha’s notion of hybridity and Wilson’s notion of collaboration and to search for new structures and spaces of authority and power? What might they look like? While Wilson’s work focuses specifically on the spaces of schooling and education, the underlying notions of authority, collaboration, and community that this theory addresses has the potential for wider application. If we address present sites of power and authority, identifying sites of institutional power and countersites of difference and alterity, might we be able to begin to imagine a third site of fluidity, collaboration, and hybridity? Might we present new possibilities for understanding, imagining, and imaging children, childhood, and childhood spaces? How might the space and the architecture of the third space look, function, or manifest? Specifically, what would childhood spaces constructed in the spirit of collaboration look like? What would the architecture of Bhabha’s hybridity yield as its structure? What would its visuality imply, constitute, or construct?

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