Only in a climate of denial could hysteria over satanic rituals at daycare centers coexist with a failure to grasp the full extent of child abuse. (More than 8.5 million women and men are survivors.) Only in a culture that represses the evidence of the senses could child pageantry grow into a $5 billion dollar industry without anyone noticing. Only in a nation of promiscuous puritans could it be a good career move to equip a six-year-old with bedroom eyes.


THE DISAPPEARING CHILD AND THE POLITICS OF INNOCENCE

The notion of the disappearing child and the myth of childhood innocence often mirror and support each other. Within the myth of innocence, children are often portrayed as inhabiting a world that is untainted, magical, and utterly protected from the harshness of adult life. In this scenario, innocence not only erases the complexities of childhood and the range of experiences different children
encounter, but it also offers an excuse for adults to evade responsibility for how children are firmly connected to and shaped by the social and cultural institutions run largely by adults. Innocence in this instance makes children invisible except as projections of adult fantasies—fantasies that allow adults to believe that children do not suffer from their greed, recklessness, perversions of will and spirit and that adults are, in the final analysis, unaccountable for their actions.¹

If innocence provides the moral ethos that distinguishes children from adults, the discourse that deals with the disappearance of childhood in our culture signals that it is being threatened by forces that tend to collapse that distinction. For example, in cultural critic Neil Postman’s thoroughly modernist view of the world, the electronic media, especially television, presents a threat to the existence of children and the civilized culture bequeathed to the West by the Enlightenment.² Not only does the very character of television—its fast-paced format, sound-byte worldview, information overload, and narrative organization—undermine the very possibility for children to engage in critical thinking, but its content works to expel images of the child from its programming by both “adultifying” the child and promoting the rise of the “childfied” adult.³ But Postman is quick to extend his thesis to other spheres, noting, for example, the disappearance of children’s clothing and children’s games, the entry of children into professional sports, and the increasing willingness of the criminal justice system to treat children as miniature adults. Postman’s lament represents less a concern with preserving childhood innocence than a cry for the passing of a world in which popular culture threatens high culture, and the culture of print loses its hold on a restricted and dominant notion of literacy and citizenship training. The loss of childhood innocence in this scenario marks the passing of a historical and political time in which children could be contained and socialized under the watchful tutelage of such dominant regulatory institutions as the family, school, and church.