

# Childhood

Christina Ritchie

It is a well-accepted truism that children represent our future. As a new millennium opens and we look toward the future it seems fitting to explore our contemporary image of childhood.

We tend to believe that the conditions and attributes of childhood are somehow locked up in nature, innate and immutable. But such is not the case. According to French social historian Philippe Ariès, the concept of childhood as we know it in modern Western culture dates from the late middle ages and has developed over many centuries of profound transformations to social structures, moral values and systems of production. Now, amidst the political clamour over “family values” we find growing demands for the reformation of our educational systems and social welfare policies, concurrent with an expanding awareness of the extent and consequences of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse of children.

For the past several years the idea of childhood, as theme, modality and subject matter, has been evident with increasing regularity in the productions of contemporary artists. As a phenomenon of the present moment, this widespread preoccupation reflects larger social forces at work. Sometimes as nostalgia, but more often as its antidote, sometimes as polemic or plea, the works of these artists remind us of the tremendous powers of observation that children seem to possess. They also assert the continuing value of play as a means for self-discovery and sharing insight. For the most part they commend as virtues those traditional attributes of childhood—weakness, imbecility, irrationalism, amorality—that were, in the past, used as arguments for its discipline and disparagement.

As one of the few experiences which we all share, childhood is a ready magnet for whatever neuroses and insights we wish to project. But to what extent do such projections represent the actual experiences of children today? Ariès argues that our modern conception of childhood is a product of the privatization of family life that accompanied the rise of the middle classes in the post-revolutionary period. However, with the nuclear family undergoing many, sometimes strange alterations, perhaps now might be a time to allow children a more democratic autonomous role.