

# A harrowing must-see

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**THE CHILDREN IN THE PICTURES**  
(MA15+)

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**I**n 2019 I interviewed Scottish crime novelist Val McDermid, creator of *Wire in the Blood*. I asked whether, in the course of her research into psychopaths, she had encountered evils too shocking to put on the page.

Her reply slightly surprised me. To paraphrase, she said, “All the time”. What such people did in the real world, which she learned from interviews with criminal profilers like her character Tony Hill, was far too confronting to put into a book for the general reading public.

I thought of this as I watched *The Children in the Pictures*, an Australian documentary about online child sexual abuse that is hard to watch and should be watched by everyone.

“People have not seen what we see, and we don’t want them to,” says Detective Inspector Jon Rouse, head of Task Force Argos, a division of the Queensland Police Service. And we do not see it in this 84-minute film.

We do not see or hear the videos of under-fives being raped for the gratification of paid-up members of online groups such as Baby Love and Toddler Fun.

This film, co-directed by Akhim Dev and Simon Nasht, does not want people to walk out or switch off because they can’t cope with what they are seeing. The filmmakers, and the members of Argos, want people to watch, care and act.

On the few times we do see what the police see, the images are blurred. Even then you will want to look away. This is the most disturbing film I have seen, in any genre.

We do see, recreated from evidence, what people ask for when they log on to paedophilia forums. “Make her scream.” The girl being abused was three. It is incomprehensible but it is happening.

We do see the names of suspects pinned to the wall, just like in a regular crime show, but as they are all online it’s not Tony Soprano the police want to bust but perfectly naughty, skunkmonster, revenger, obey and so on. And they are not in New Jersey but all over the world, connected

by the web. Most importantly we hear the officers talk about their harrowing work. “You hear the children scream,” Rouse says. “There are things that will never leave you, ever.”

Argos is a world leader in investigating child exploitation and abuse and several of its officers started working with it in their own countries before moving to Australia to join up.

Among those interviewed are Paul Griffiths, ex Greater Manchester Police, Adele Desirs, ex Interpol in France, Scott Anderson from the US, who says his previous work in counter terrorism prepared him for the job, and Warren Bulmer, ex Toronto City Police.

When Bulmer was first contacted out of the blue by Rouse it related to a case out of his jurisdiction. Asked why he decided to help, he says that when a child is being abused “there is no such thing as no”.

When Argos, named after the all-seeing, all-protecting giant from Greek mythology, was founded in 1997 its main job was to investigate historic allegations of abuse in children’s institutions. “Then,” says Rouse, who has worked in child protection for two decades, “the internet happened.”

As child sexual abuse videos exploded over the regular internet and then the dark web, Argos fought like with like, infiltrating the websites to try to track down who was making them and who was watching them.

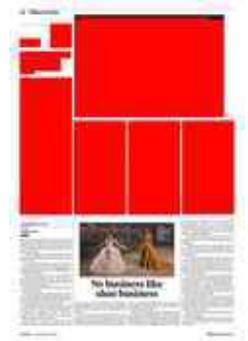
The number one priority was – and still is (most of the officers are now seconded to the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation) – to find and rescue the children in the pictures.

To do so they had to go undercover and join the online groups. They had to pass themselves off as perverts and, ideally, as the administrators of the paedophile websites.

One of the main tasks is victim identification: working out, from the videos, where the children are being held.

It is harrowing to hear the officers talk about using Photoshop to “sanitise” the images before sending them to, say, a motel chain in the hope of narrowing down the search.

An arrest in 2005 upped the ante. Argos was able to assume the identity of a man known as Red Rocket who ran an online ring called The Group. “We became the enemy,” Griffiths says. Asked whether this is morally questionable, De-



sirs says she does not know. “But it works,” she continues. “We are fighting for the children and any weapon that is available I am going to use.”

When The Group was shut down it had 54 members. Today, the membership of similar forums runs to the hundreds of thousands if not millions. The police fight this problem but admit they cannot fix it.

To use another Greek myth, every time a snake is cut off Hydra’s head, two more grow.

One of the main cases explored involved an offender, Mr X, who specialised in making videos of the sexual abuse of boys aged under 5.

Mr X was caught, eventually, in the Philippines. Yet asked, today, how many Mr Xs she is working on, Desirs says, “I have 500-600 on my list at the moment, and that’s nothing compared to how many there are.”

She adds that even when a child is saved, “We are always too late”.

Rouse says law enforcement is only a partial response to what he sees as a societal problem. He criticises social media groups such as Facebook for introducing purported privacy protections that he thinks shields the abusers.

If you have mobile phone-addicted pre-teens or teens under your roof, what he says will make you rethink your screen time rules.

“Perhaps people cannot physically or psychologically grasp what is going on in the material that we view,” he says. “I think everyone shudders and thinks, ‘That’s terrible’.

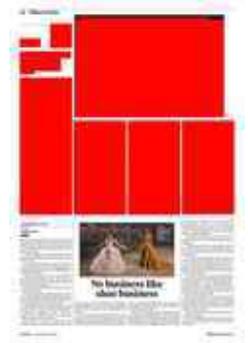
“But it’s happening. It’s happening every single day. It is happening right now as we do the interview.”

That’s what makes The Children in the Pictures a must-see film.

It is on in the cinemas that are open now and also available via virtual screenings.

It is scheduled to be screened on SBS late next month.





# A harrowing must-see



Scott Anderson, Warren Bulmer, Jon Rouse, Paul Griffiths and Adele Desirs

In cinemas and virtual screenings. ●●●●●  
Some sessions include Q&As.  
Screening details:  
[childreninthepictures.org](http://childreninthepictures.org)