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Playtime: Toys and the Labor of Childhood

by JANE KUENZ

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, the Reverend Jerry Falwell distinguished himself on the national front by speculating in public that Tinky Winky, the purple, be-pursed Teletubby of the children's television show by the same name, was a gay role model. Rather than delight in this possibility, Falwell chose instead to warn less discerning people of the dangers Tinky posed to their children, chief among which was the likelihood of their following Tinky down the path of vice and into what Falwell insists on calling "the gay lifestyle." Fortunately, Falwell's brief excursion into children's popular culture met the ridicule it deserves and, if anything, appears to have caused a run on Tinkys at toy stores, if not also a change of heart in Falwell himself as evidenced by his more recent meetings with gay and lesbian Christian groups. Of course, Tinky Winky was not the first representative of children's culture to be outed—some of us can remember the suspicious glances cast Bert and Ernie's way—but his recent fame highlights again the high stakes surrounding children's cultural choices and the confidence with which adults presume to judge them.

If the silliness of Falwell's remarks underscores the limitations of such presumptions, and particularly the danger of confusing the meanings adults ascribe to children's toys with the meanings children themselves find in them, it should not distract us from the seriousness of children's culture itself. Roland Barthes's early and prescient observation that, whether we like it or not, "toys *always mean something*" might be extended to other aspects of children's lives and help us understand how the cultural forms and social practices that together produce cultural articulations of "childhood" reflect and reproduce social relations in the adult world these children will soon inhabit. For Barthes, this last point is literal since, for him, toys generally prefigure the adult world and the child's future relation to it essentially by offering a microcosm of it. His favorite example is the baby doll: "There exist, for instance, dolls which urinate; they have an oesophagus, one gives them a bottle, they wet their nappies; soon, no doubt, milk will turn to water in their stomachs. This is meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of

house-keeping" (53). That children's toys might be implicated in the reproduction of dominant social norms is hardly an original notion, particularly at a time when the line of "causality" seems fairly direct between Easy-Bake Ovens and the normative gender roles that continue to define meal preparation and other forms of domestic work as outside the sphere of productive labor. Barthes's primary concern, in fact, is not with gender, but with the way most toys—he excepts blocks—are already functional, their use inscribed in the very design of the toy itself rather than in the possibilities the child can imagine for it. Thus "play" amounts to emulating the habits and posture of adult ownership as children learn the proper use of objects already made by someone else. This is perhaps most obvious in girls' toys, so many of which are simply younger, pinker versions of the accessories and beauty aids they will buy later. It may also help explain some of the hostility to Tinky's purse.

In other words, children's play is really a form of work, one that poses as an alternative to the adult world, yet which habituates children to their future labor in it, of which consumption is a significant part. In the discussion below, I hope to contextualize our understanding of children's toys and play in terms of this work, particularly the modes of production and consumption that increasingly circumscribe both children's lives and that of their parents. These include the intimate relation between children's commodity culture and women's work outside the home; the production of childhood as a distinct and definable stage in life either through symbolic appropriation or the consumption of specific commodities; the consequent reproduction in children of dominant social norms and tastes; and the central role of consumption in children's daily life, especially the alternately degraded and creative work of consuming toys and other forms of the mass culture available to them, work which otherwise goes by the name of "play."

This last is crucial in getting beyond easy judgments about the character of children's toys and what children do with them. For example, the suggestiveness of Barthes's recognition that ownership is an integral part of children's play should not blind us to the fact that in terms of its conception of both the child and the child's relation to her world, his commentary on baby dolls is not significantly different from Falwell's homophobic analysis of Tinky Winky or from a feminist critique of Barbie that blames her for eating disorders in young girls as well as a host of other gender-related dysfunctions said to be a consequence of Barbie's unrivaled career as domestic über-babe. All assume that children uncritically consume their own culture and, even then, consume it in the same way adults would or in the way adults believe children would. More importantly, each relies for the force of its critique on an image of children's essential innocence, on a belief in their separation from a larger adult world seen as alternately hostile or foreign, always threatening to

invade and corrupt that innocence, and on the need for children to be protected from that world by adults who act and speak for them.

The dangers of seeing children in these terms, as existing outside the political, as almost pre-social and naturally good as a result, should be evident to anyone who follows party politics in the United States. Emptied of any meaning or political agency in their own right, children are routinely converted in national discourse into blank slates that can then be made to exhibit and maintain the symbolic demands subsequently made upon them. As with Falwell and Barbie-bashing feminists, this violence occurs on both the left and the right. Thus, every election year we can hear Republicans invoking childhood innocence as a link to a putatively better past and as a tool for enforcing normative sexual identities and gender roles. Democrats, meanwhile, position the child as a bridge to a better future in the service of their own myths of progress.¹ That we may prefer one or the other of these social narratives and the specific social policies they reinforce does not change the fact that both deny children their own political voice and agency. The insistence on children's innocence is particularly disturbing since, in universalizing the child, it simultaneously refuses to admit which children need to be protected (since we don't actually protect them all) while clearly announcing who and what constitute threats to them.

Of course, as the Falwell story reminds us, nowhere has this manipulation of the category of the child and of the myth of children's innocence, especially as it is marshaled in response to some "threat," been more evident and more potentially damaging than in its use to police adult sexuality and children's bodies and to terrorize working women with the specter of endangered children at day care centers staffed by Satan worshipers and pedophiles. While we may feel repelled by images of little JonBenet tarted up for her next gig, we should also recall that the impulse to see in her life and death a morality tale about the invasion of adult sexualities and gender into the otherwise pure space of childhood also denies children like JonBenet any role in creating, shaping, and using their own fantasies simply because they are fantasies we don't like or will not admit to sharing or because we fear they will lead to just the kind of assault she endured.² JonBenet's may be an ugly story, but it is not a simple or obvious one. Its complexities should alert us to how an overemphasis on pedophilia in our discussions of children may actually displace consideration of the myriad *other* ways children are imbricated

1. See Henry Jenkins' comparison of the 1992 convention speeches of Hillary Rodham Clinton and Susan Molinari, both of which use the figure of the innocent child for quite different ideological strategies (4-14).

2. For discussions of childhood sexuality, see Kincaid on the production of erotic children, Walkerdine on working-class girls' Lolita fantasies, and Giroux on child beauty pageants.

in social relations with adults, not to mention the ways children attempt to negotiate them.

This notion of children's innocence is the product of the historical development of childhood as a category in the West and is directly related to children's central place in contemporary commodity culture. Indeed, historians have demonstrated rather convincingly that the period of life we now identify as childhood comes into being and develops as a distinct division in human life parallel to and in conjunction with the creation and development of a market economy. There is, for example, little that resembles the condition we think of as the innocent child in medieval culture when casual nudity and touching among adults and children were common and where children routinely heard dirty jokes and shared beds with each other and adults. The rise of the middle class altered much of this by elevating the need to define distinctly middle-class behaviors that now must be learned and reproduced in order to keep the class distinguished from everyone else. Thus, childhood emerges as a period of education when one must be taught a specialized body of knowledge in order to conform to evolving social norms and, for boys, in order to succeed in the marketplace. Increasingly in the Eighteenth Century, childhood is seen as a time of freedom before work and children themselves as closer to nature and valued precisely for the fact that they are not yet like adults. By the Nineteenth Century, this belief was manifested in efforts to prolong childhood beyond its usual length and to represent children by actions and goods specific to them. It is in the Nineteenth Century, too, when the law catches up, as, for the first time, legal protections for animals against physical abuse are extended to children and child labor laws begin excluding them from the world of work. Later, they will be made exempt from the adult criminal justice system as well. Now, increasingly, the lost value of children's labor is compensated for by the growing sentimental and symbolic value attached to them in the home, particularly in the middle-class home, and, as we have seen, in the public imaginary.³

More than anything else, the articulation of the modern child is visible in the growth of products marketed specifically at this new category of persons and designed to reinforce the idea that children are, in fact, distinct and thus require their own kind of stuff. For the first time, department stores devote entire sections exclusively to children's goods. These include special clothes that are now clearly identified as "children's clothes" and distinguished from the clothes adults wear; special furniture like high chairs, school desks, and sitting chairs requiring special rooms like nurseries and playrooms to house and maintain children and their possessions; special foods like breakfast cere-

3. For histories of childhood, see Aries, Calvery, DeMause, and Pollack.

als advertised in terms of their ability to fulfill the unique nutritional requirements of children; special medicines and soaps geared toward children's sensitivity and medical needs, both ostensibly required by children's greater delicacy and purity; and, finally, special tools for children's play, by which I mean their toys. As Stephen Kline has argued, the intense cultural stylization of the child, particularly in the last hundred years, is one reason why it is much easier to pick out children in twentieth-century art and photography than in the artwork of earlier periods (55). Children are marked off as different, and, certainly by the 1920s, they are used in advertising to promote normative ideas of family and culture. The modern family, for example, increasingly is figured in relation to its consumption by and for children, as the entire family's prosperity is measured in terms of its children's health and well-being. As the standard of living increased throughout this century, the burden of establishing the family's prosperity is manifested in changes in childrearing and consumption habits, as the new locus of concern shifts from preserving children's physical health to overseeing their psychological and moral development.

This is, I suspect, pretty much where we are now, and one can register the effects of this progress not only in changes in toys themselves—for example, in the increase in “educational” or “cultural” toys designed with the intention of making children better people—but also in the competing social anxieties with which adults approach children's culture, specifically guilt and nostalgia. One hears the former in a mother's insistence that her child was never given guns as toys and that he grew up with “‘good’ educational shows” like *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers*. Both in this and in her honest admission that parenthood is a humbling endeavor, she speaks for many people in their efforts to shield children from some of the more apparently disabling aspects of dominant culture and in their disappointment in discovering how genuinely difficult that is to do. I want to put this idea of parental guilt squarely on the table because I think it is something that is marshaled and manipulated in ways parents often do not see, probably because they are too busy feeling guilty or running around after their kids. This guilt needs to be defused and understood for what it is.

First, it is seldom remarked, but certainly the case, that the changes in children's consumption and in marketing geared toward them are directly related to changes in women's roles in the workplace. It is simply not possible to talk about children's commodity culture or children's play without considering both the remarkable amount of unpaid labor women perform in the home and the increases in their paid work outside of it.⁴ The exponential

4. On changes in women's work in the twentieth century, see Berk, Cowan, and Hochschild.

increase in the number of doodads for kids—not just toys, but convenience foods, videos, strollers, car seats, and other gadgets for hauling them and their stuff around or for feeding and entertaining them as they move from home to car to day care to the store and back again—is self-evidently related to the fact that women do not have as much time to take care of their children as they would if they did not work outside the home. Advertisers certainly understand this and have responded accordingly, for example in the promotion of goods in terms of their ability to occupy or distract children so that parents can do something else. Thus videos and cartoons allow women to cook supper or do other things around the house, or the right toys have to be assembled for every outing to the grocery store to keep the kid from wreaking havoc in the aisles. Indeed, I have had more than one student come to my office with a child in tow and a collection of crayons and coloring books to keep her occupied while we spoke. Something similar is surrounding those things hawked for their ability to defuse conflict in the home. People of a certain age will remember that Life cereal supported itself for over a decade with just this kind of plug, as we all watched to see if “Mikey” would ever eat his breakfast.

These things have become so naturalized for us that we no longer connect them to the social relations they reflect and support. But it is not hard to see how behind our concerns for children’s culture, especially our concern for their “psychological and moral development,” is an image of the mother as a figure of neglect. You can hear it in how we talk to each other: “Oh, your children watch TV?” “My Timmy’s never been interested in guns, but, then, I never liked Barbie either.” But this cattiness only masks the greater fear: that our own efforts for Timmy’s welfare might not be enough and are, regardless, poor compensation for what he might have if we stayed at home. My point is not that we should stay home, but that we need to understand how our guilt about our children’s cultural choices—the toys they like, the shows they watch—is related to and manipulated by this image of the neglectful mother, how powerful a pull that is on us even when we do understand it, but, most importantly, how that image can be sustained only by abstracting it from a broader historical analysis of the social and economic relations in which children and adults find themselves. Such work could, at the very least, give us more and better ways of understanding how we are pulled into these cultural constructions even when we think we are separating ourselves from them.

Some careful historicizing, for example, would quickly deflate many people’s expectations for the educational materials and toys they encourage their kids to play with. After all, the rise in the availability of educational toys and of specialized toy stores has less to do with parental demand for these things, even less with the good intentions of toy makers, than with the overall frag-

mentation of the toy market itself and corporate attempts to adapt to it. So all those people buying the “American Girl” series’ Reconstruction-era Addy with her various companion books and assorted accessories (including a miniature version of the *Union Reader* to go with her school desk and tin lunch pail) instead of Puerto Rican Barbie on the theory that they are at least not buying into this mass-produced clone doll and are somehow, therefore, opting out of mass culture, are really just being targeted in another segment of the toy market itself, probably a segment that has already figured you would end up there. This is only one of the ways in which our various attempts to circumvent or short-circuit the overwhelming presence of consumption in our children’s lives backfire and turn into de facto endorsements of it. The discourse of children’s rights or a preference for a kind of permissiveness in their upbringing, for example, by emphasizing children’s roles in decision-making in the family, can actually be said to play into advertisers’ needs, not only by encouraging children to think of themselves as consumers, but by encouraging a notion of the family as really just a collection of privatized consumers who happen to live together because it provides an economical way to house all their stuff.

Clearly children learn from owning and playing with toys a number of our cultural conceptions about possessions: how to share, how to give gifts and receive them graciously, how to wait, organize, and lend their things. They also learn something about the rights of ownership and fairness, and about the unequal distribution of wealth and the relation of wealth to social status. For their part, advertisers quickly came to understand that what kids look for in commercials is other kids. This is why you do not see or hear adults in toy commercials. You also don’t see or hear kids talking about their toys; what you do see are kids playing with toys, always in groups, usually same sex. As one researcher from Mattel put it, “kids like to watch other kids on TV or in the ads for toys—to gauge their own reactions against those of other children” (qtd. in Kline 171). This seems to go hand in hand with the widely confirmed observation that children are extremely peer conscious, that they want to be with others who share their judgments about their toys, and are hyper-alert to any suggestion in a toy commercial that a particular toy will either augment or compromise that goal. For example, Mattel and Hasbro discovered that toy commercials with just one kid were unsuccessful, that their test audience of kids actually said things like “that toy can’t be any fun” or, worse, “that kid can’t be any fun.” In other words, children learn very early to see toys not just as another thing to have, but as something to use in achieving social goals, chief among which is relations with other kids.

That they understand and accept this is one of the reasons why some of the best research on children’s culture, especially children’s desires and fan-

tasies in relation to their play, has been done by the people who manufacture and market children's toys. Unencumbered by a social conscience of any kind, toy makers are propelled by the most uncomplicated of motivations—the need to sell—and are frankly and openly committed to producing whatever toy will do just that. In other words, their very lack of designs for a child's moral and intellectual growth has allowed them in some ways to become more closely attuned to what children actually want. This is one reason Fisher-Price started its own nursery school in order to have a readily available test group to study. Calling it “a pragmatic research effort,” the company claimed to “try to relate what we're doing to children, how they act, how they develop. Their likes and dislikes. We want to know what parents think, of course, but our real concern is for children. We're out to create toys that are fun for children” (qtd. in Kline 185). This does not mean the motives of toy makers are innocent or that they do not have substantial say in shaping children's interests. Children may have preferences, but they do not make these preferences into cultural symbols on their own. For example, while it is well known that many girls have a thing for horses, girls themselves probably never imagined the possibility of linking their love of horses with their interest in hair, as did the makers of “My Little Pony,” which comes with its own vanity and mirror, combs, and barrettes for arranging Topsy Tulip's pink mane.

While it is true that toy makers do not just cater to the already existent or freely articulated desires of children, but instead help shape both those desires and the goods that will ostensibly satisfy them, this critique ignores several points which together limit somewhat its force. First, the argument that children's culture exists primarily in the realm of consumption, and even then consumption from a limited range of choices children themselves neither determine nor control, describes not just the condition of children in an adult world, but the condition of everyone in an advanced, postindustrial, and increasingly global capitalist economy. Whether we like it or not, most people in a country like the United States have limited if any say in the “culture” that is produced for them, other than choosing to watch one movie over another. This is not to say that there are no artists anymore, only that what used to be known as folk culture has largely disappeared for many people in the wake of mass culture and the mass production and reproduction of commodities and images. Rather than sitting around fretting about this or feeling guilty or deriding ourselves and each other for the fact that most of us do not make and distribute our own movies or because our children, in spite of our best wishes and efforts, seem always to prefer the most schlocky, mass-produced junk they can find, it might be more profitable for us actually to look at what people are doing with the mass culture available to them rather than

deciding beforehand what their relation to it is.

Second, in spite of the omnipresence of mass culture, there is not now and never has been any sure correlation between what the culture industry produces and what people will choose to consume. If there were, then music producers would not toss in the trash nine-tenths of the CDs recorded in any given year and which never go anywhere because they fail to capture anyone's interest.⁵ Likewise there is no such thing as an all-powerful toy industry overdetermining our children and their future with the toys foisted on them year after year. Even a cursory glance at the bargain bins at Toys-R-Us will make this evident, as will the annual amazement of film and toy makers at the toys children actually choose to make popular. The industry is rife with examples: a character line called the "Inhumanoids" was a flop in spite of its extensive promotion because the toys actually scared kids. None of its creators expected or ever really understood why the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" took off with kids, though they were quick to recognize the Turtles' popularity and capitalize on it. Similarly, the makers of the animated film *Toy Story* were caught off guard when in addition to Talking Woody and Buzz Lightyear, the cowboy and astronaut toys that had been the object of all the producer's promotional efforts and tie-ins with fast-food restaurants and toy stores, children perversely demanded the film's mutant toys as well. For those of you unfamiliar with *Toy Story*, wanting the mutant toys—these are toys that have been disassembled and rebuilt by the nasty boy next door, e.g., he puts a baby doll's head on the body of a spider—is actually akin to preferring the misfit toys from the end of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* to the "normal" toys that save them.

This last example should highlight the difficulties of sustaining at least one of our typical complaints about children's popular culture: the guilt about kids' watching too much television, recently compounded by the recommendation to pediatricians to investigate and encourage parents to monitor the amount of television their children watch. Yet, recommendations like these draw on a set of assumptions about television watching, many of which have long been disputed if not outright rejected by scholars in communications and certainly in cultural studies: TV is bad; it is bad because 1) what is shown on TV is dumb, violent, sexist or some combination of the above and because 2) watching TV is essentially a passive, non-imaginative activity. You can hear again in this last complaint the same idealized image of childhood as a time of activity and development. In fact, "passive" might be about the worst thing one can say about a child today as opposed to earlier histori-

5. See John Fiske's discussion of the necessity of "relevance" in the "Popular Discrimination" chapter of *Understanding Popular Culture*.

cal periods when docility in children was actually considered a virtue. Unfortunately, we simply cannot assume with any consistent accuracy that the design of a toy or the content of a television show determines for kids how it can be played with or how it must be watched. Children are able at a very young age to recognize genres, and they watch TV in different ways, sometimes paying close attention, sometimes while playing with something else. Television certainly encodes dominant ideology, and it also carries oppositional meanings, but the presence of either tells us nothing about how children will read or use them. This is why research on children's television that stops at content analysis—how many acts of violence, how many girls per boy—will never tell us the whole story about what children are doing with TV or how “active” or “passive” they are as watchers of it.

The popularity of character dolls like the Power Rangers for boys is partly a result of the way these toys and TV are mutually reinforcing. One reason why it is difficult to intervene in how children play with these dolls is because the dolls come not just with a name and identity, but with an elaborate history and sense of purpose, a whole cosmology of allies and enemies, that may seem to us arbitrary and weird or obvious and dumb, but which nevertheless has a kind of internal consistency that children not only know, but respect. Often, they know this “backstory” from watching cartoons composed of the same characters. But even when they do not get the backstory from TV, they get it from their friends, because it is widely understood by these kids that to play with one of the power rangers is to play with him within the parameters already established by the show or by the toys already available. This is why kids don't really mix and match dolls from different product lines and why suggestions from mom or the teacher that the dolls act out alternative scenarios fall flat, are met with looks of confusion, or are endured for her benefit, then dropped when she's gone. Kids will just say, “but this guy always fights with that guy.”

A toy's backstory also contributes to the self-segregation by gender which is almost universally reported in studies of children at play and reinforced in school by the teacher's mantra “boys and girls,” as though this were the only or at least the definitive way of categorizing human beings.⁶ Imagine, for example, asking students to form lines of quiet people and loud people. It is a chicken and egg problem: the toys are obviously highly gendered, almost comically so, yet it is too easy to attribute all of this to toy makers who, after all, just want to make money, not to engage in social engineering. For example, Hasbro, which makes many of the character toys, claimed they tried at first to design a character toy that would appeal to both boys and girls and

6. See Martin on the ways teachers manage girls' and boys' behaviors and bodies differently.

would actually cross the usual age groupings. But they had to give up because nothing worked. Their intention, of course, was not to come up with a gender-adverse doll, but to save themselves the considerable expense it takes now to design these product lines precisely because you cannot count on their success without marketing them in their own TV shows if not a movie as well. The result of this experiment, though, was greater market segmentation by gender. The toys are heavily marketed to girls or boys with the result that only girls or boys know the whole narrative that surrounds the toy and are thus able to play with it in the way kids want to. This is, I suspect, why boys are more likely to play with the female dolls that come with their action figures than they are to play with Ken. Indeed, those toy commercials in which boys and girls appear together, or which include adults, are for toys which do not have an accompanying backstory. Even when they do play with each other's toys, boys and girls play with them in very different ways: GI Joe is put down for a nap with a bottle.

Of course, what people don't like about these toys is the fact that play with them seems overly prescribed by a television show, thus thwarting all opportunities for imagination and originality. But kids' play is always a combination of imitation and imagination; it may also be that imitation requires more in the way of imagination than we realize or admit. I suspect the real complaint here is that television has replaced other cultural narratives that could serve as the basis for their imitative and imaginative play. This may be a bad thing, though I am not entirely sure of that, but it is not a new thing and it is, again, not exclusive to children. Now for the nostalgia moment: I can remember very entertaining and what I certainly thought were imaginative games of acting out entire episodes of *The Mod Squad*. Actually, we used TV all the time as a source book for play. In fact, in this essay, I myself used television as a reference point when I tried to explain one mass-culture offering for kids, *Toy Story*, in terms of another, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. But before anyone cuts in and says, "yeah, but *The Mod Squad* was about these cool kids (who just happened to work for the man) and Power Rangers are really politically offensive," let me say that when we weren't playing *The Mod Squad* we were playing something like *Lost in Space* or *Mannix* or, in the spirit of really true confessions, *Here Come the Brides*. While we usually based our play on an episode of a show we had recently seen, we never hesitated to amend and adapt it to current contingencies: altering the plot, adding or deleting characters according to who was available to play. In fact, I think the only thing we did not fiddle with was gender, but I am not willing to pin that on TV, at least not exclusively. Television, in other words, gets put to many different kinds of uses by kids, most obviously as the basis for their interaction with other kids. Like toys, it is less important for what it is than

for what it can be made to do in a social realm. The suspicion that children's minds are being colonized by Barney downplays the extent to which children do not simply recapitulate what they have seen and heard on TV, but revamp and reinterpret it in the context of their play.

The biggest criticism one can make about television is that it makes children want more toys while at the same time presenting them with images of uniformly perfect families, that is, families made equal at the level of consumption. In other words, it does what everything else in our culture does, including toy stores, by presenting children with a wealth of goods while obscuring the unequal social relations required to produce and consume them. This includes gender relations. In "Gender as Commodity," Susan Willis points out that when children encounter gendered toys or when they discover entire areas of the toy store already gendered for boys or girls, they see gender as something inhering in the toy itself rather than as something that has resulted from a series of decisions made by actual human people, all of them adults, at every stage of the toy's design, production, marketing, and distribution. To them, toys just appear on the boys' shelves or in the Barbie aisles, and, thus, seem naturally to belong in one place or the other. As Willis notes, one can see a similar confusion resulting from hidden social relations in the way kids think of ATM machines as cash dispensers with little or no conception of the financial exchanges taking place somewhere else (24-25). We might think also on this point of the frequency with which the word "magic" appears on toy packaging, especially on girls' toys, where it refers to the magic of disappearing labor. Barthes might be intrigued to discover that forty years later, little girls have available to them Newborn Diaper Surprise, capable of eliminating dirty diapers—since, unlike real babies, when this doll drinks, "the color magically appears in her diaper without the diaper mess! The Diaper Surprise Center makes it easy to dispose of soiled diapers. Magically, a clear one is right at your finger tips!" Yet alongside this modern convenience is Amazing Amy, which enjoyed a brief vogue in 1998. Amazing Amy was a life-sized toddler so relentless in her demands on her young owner that some parents felt compelled to lock her in the basement out of earshot so their daughters could sleep through the night.

It is true that children who are watching television are not outside playing tag, but this is the point at which we have to consider seriously the degree to which nostalgia is skewing our understanding of what kids are actually doing now. In the last year I have been clipping newspaper and popular magazine articles on kids and toys, and to date there are only two kinds of stories published on this topic. There is the story about how kids do not like regular toys any more, but only want the high-tech stuff, especially video games, but also anything that can be rigged up to a computer. Then there is the other story

about how kids soon cast aside their high-tech stuff and return to the old standbys, what are referred to in the toy business as “classic toys,” sort of like “classic rock”: Etch-a-Sketch, Legos, Lincoln Logs, Spirograph, Play Doh, and the venerable Mr. and Mrs. Potatohead. Whether or not it is more imaginative to stick a foot in Mr. Potatohead’s ear than it is to turn a person into a robot or an airplane, as the transformers do, is not entirely clear to me, though I take seriously the point that change in the transformer toys is already inscribed in the toy itself and thus limited by the toy’s mechanics—what it can and cannot become—rather than by the child’s imagination (Willis 36).

But I am skeptical of the claim, made by the president of the company that produces the Radio Flyer, and one I suspect is shared on some level by the people who wish their kids would play with classic toys rather than the high-tech ones, that these toys endure because they have “intrinsic value.” They do not have intrinsic value; what they have is the value parents and grandparents remember their having and which is now seen by them rather in the same way gender in toys is seen by children: i.e., as intrinsic to the object itself, rather than as a function of the object’s *use*. This is what is known in Marxist theory as a commodity fetish, best evidenced in children’s culture in the string of highly profitable collectibles such as Beanie Babies, Furbies, and now Pokémon cards and characters. But the notion that children would be better off playing with a Ouija board or Slinky instead of Transformers or whatever, no matter how much fun we had with those toys as kids or how important they might have been to the way we negotiated social relations with our peer groups, does not mean that the toy would have that function for children today even if they enjoy playing with it too. It also forgets that “classic” toys were probably once considered faddish, mass-culture junk in their own time, in the same way that “classic rock” used to be just top-40.

Let’s face it: part of what motivates adults to purchase certain kinds of toys or to encourage their kids to play in certain ways or to watch certain shows is the fear that we will be somehow implicated in their consumption and because, frankly, we don’t like what they like. What happens, though, is that this very simple idea gets complicated when it meets up with our belief in children’s innocence and their need to be protected, and with parental guilt, particularly guilt in relation to “overseeing children’s psychological and moral growth.” All of this makes it hard for people to see what they are actually doing when, for example, a class of first-grade girls is encouraged to make fun of Barbie for their skit in the school show, as happened to the daughter of a friend. I do not for a minute believe that that skit would have ever been done on their own by the girls who actually play with Barbie, the 3-to-6-year-olds. So, I am wondering at what point it became acceptable to

mock openly the taste of other people. If we are not used to talking about this issue in these terms, then that may be because we have fallen victim to a familiar confusion of categories—specifically taste, morality, and class—that results in assigning moral values to what are essentially differences in taste or judgment about aesthetic merit between working- middle- and upper-class people.

Consider, in this light, “Olympic Skater Barbie and Ken,” two dolls I have displayed in various public discussions of toys, always to the amusement of colleagues and students. But what exactly is so wrong with “Olympic Skater Barbie and Ken” that we feel compelled and entitled to laugh at them? Perhaps the initial reaction is to their appearance: the turquoise costumes with rhinestone trim and Barbie’s gloriously big hair. Maybe the problem is that on some aesthetic registers figure skating falls somewhere between bad camp and an even worse kind of showy patriotism, a sort of kitsch ballet, neither art nor sport. Should this bother us when it is an activity publicly dominated by women and gay men? Consider also “Power and Beauty, with Fist Pounding Action,” male and female character dolls based on people who appear on World Championship Wrestling’s *Monday Nitro*. Like other action figures, they come already embedded in their own cultural milieu, with their own plots, costumes, and assortment of colorful friends. In this case, they just happen to be the people from professional wrestling, as seen on TV. What’s the problem with them? What particular danger do they pose? Is it that kids will start throwing each other against walls or begin attempting wrestling holds? They do that already. Or is it that they will come home one day looking like Jesse Ventura in his early days? I am not saying this fear is not real, though I do think it underestimates kids’ appreciation for camp and the carnivalesque. One of the little discomforts of living in the present moment is the realization that postmodernism has effectively broken down and rearranged the distinctions between high and low culture, so that, for example, wrestling’s audience does not correspond in any clear way to any one socioeconomic class. At the same time, political economy has made it more and more likely that the same class shifts will happen to some of us: that is, that some people in the middle class or their children will get caught up in the downwardly mobile trend of economic opportunity and end up working class, if not actually white trash, which has become an aesthetic and economic category.

Anyone who needs an object lesson in the reproduction of dominant sensibility and taste should head out to the mall the next time there is a display of children’s art arranged by grade—kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and on up. What you can see in this arrangement is the point at which formal art training begins because it is the point at which the quality of the art declines. It is quite stark when, by the third grade or so, the almost native sense of

color and composition children exhibit in the earlier grades gives way to dull and predictable compositions and clichéd subjects, sometimes reproduced almost exactly from one child to the next, as the definition of good or bad art becomes how close one can get to reproducing a standard model.

We all know that children's stuff is class-marked in all the ways adult stuff is. We've been to the Baby Gap. We've seen the Eddy Bauer car seats with their tasteful hunter green and tan plaid reversible cushions. Anyone can go into Toys-R-Us and find, in the aisles of the girls' section devoted to household appliances, competing versions of stove and microwave sets, one called "Victorian Kitchen" retailing for \$100 and another called mundanely if also tellingly "Family Kitchen" and selling for half that. But none of this quite gets at what I am getting at here, which has more to do with how our criticism of children's culture (for example our scrutiny of it for its potentially damaging effects on a child's mental or moral health) actually preserves cultural hierarchies and the cultural capital of the people benefiting from them by dismissing children's popular culture in favor of more acceptable middle- and highbrow versions. This is, finally, as far as I can tell, what really distinguishes Addy from Peruvian Barbie.⁷ To be frank, I find it strange that no one ever seems to think that repeatedly telling or intimating to kids, particularly girls, that their toys are stupid, or boring, or somehow just wrong, might actually do as much harm as we think the toys do. Has it not occurred to anyone that our criticism of Barbie or My Little Pony or Strawberry Shortcake not only reproduces the criticism girls already hear all the time about their toys from boys, but repeats it in exactly the same terms: Girls' toys are dumb because they are so girly. We thus risk compounding rather than correcting the poor sense of self-worth ostensibly propelling girls toward hyper-feminine toys in the first place (Seiter 145-71).

Maybe we should go with John Locke. He thought kids should have as many toys as they want, as long as they make them all themselves. This would probably calm many people's nerves, though we might have to brace ourselves for what kids come up with. One of the great things about the animated show *South Park* is how, though not designed for children, it manages to capture a certain quality of children's culture so exactly and irreverently. I am thinking of its combination of gallows humor and lunchroom and bath-

7. To add a little more historical perspective on this, consider the ad for colored baby dolls from the *Amsterdam News* from 6 December 1922. The *News* had a wide readership, though those African Americans who could afford only one paper were more likely to buy one of the other major, white dailies. This ad is, in theory, directed at all African-American families with daughters, though practically speaking only middle- and upper-class families could probably ever buy this doll. As with Addy and Peruvian Barbie, its chief feature is the pedagogical value of its difference. In fact, a short editorial appearing in the same paper extols the benefits of "Negro dolls" for young girls: "There is a world of difference between [a white and a black baby doll]. One teaches race pride and respect for one's self and one's own kind [while] the other teaches your child that she is inferior and subservient." For an historical look at dolls and girls, see Formanek-Brunnel.

room jokes, as in the case of the kid who dies every week or the talking turd phenomenon which, even more than the weekly-expiring child, has raised the eyebrows of would-be critics. It is somewhat refreshing to see the ways kids resist their own idealization and cultural appropriation by seeming to revel in their own gross-out aesthetic. This aesthetic is probably more operative with boys, but is not exclusive to them. Think of all the candy or kids' foods that come in weird, non-food colors or that do strange things in your mouth—bubbling or crackling—or that turn your mouth different colors. Or candy that comes in the shape of things adults don't eat and would actually find repulsive: worms and bugs. Or food that you can't eat or toys that you can't play with without getting dirty. Remember candy cigarettes? I assume they've died a natural death because of the fear that they glamorized smoking, but never forget that we did with candy cigarettes what no adult ever does with a real cigarette—we ate them.⁸

One of the many things Toni Morrison gets right in her novel *The Bluest Eye* is just this fascination by kids with grossness, particularly grossness in relation to their own bodies. Readers of the novel will remember Claudia's fascination with her body's capacity to produce a whole range of obnoxious or revolting smells, sounds, and substances. This is one of Morrison's ways of calling attention to how growing up for Claudia, and for other little girls and boys too, is in great measure a process of changing one's relation to one's own body. And so, over the course of the novel, we watch with a combination of horror and inevitability as Claudia learns to see herself as dirty and in need of the baths she hated so much as a child. Perhaps remembering this story and children's fascination with the revolting more generally can give us a different way to think about those video games in which blood and guts seem always to be spurting out of someone's side or people's heads and various other body parts are dismembered and flying through the air.

While I do not want to open up new avenues for the flow of parental guilt, I believe we need to think through more completely what we are doing when we resist children's culture, if only because such rethinking might suggest a different way of conceptualizing how we relate to them and their stuff. At the very least, we cannot redirect children's energies to toys we find more palatable if we do not understand what has attracted them to the toys they already have or want and which seem to satisfy some need otherwise not satisfied in their lives, a need, for example, for community in addition to or as an alternative to the ones they now enjoy, family and school. If I could add a corollary to this it would be that we adults need to understand what our investments in children's popular culture might say about our own social needs as well as

8. See Alison James on how children's culture appropriates rejected items and aesthetics from parent cultures.

about how we have learned to satisfy them. If there is utopian potential in what many see as the degraded character of much of children's toys today, it is in the uses to which children put them—uses which are, finally, more creative than we may have been willing to admit and more resistant than we might want to imagine. The world of children's play may look, as Barthes suggested, like a microcosm of the world of work they will soon encounter, but it is not a world they are required to reproduce nor one to which we ourselves have a simple or direct relationship.

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